

ROAD

FREEK

PREFACE

I didn't write the work presented here and make no claim to having done so. And I think that even a cursory comparison of the writing style with my own should be enough to convince all but the most cynical that this is the case. But still my name appears as the author of the work, and for this I believe I owe some sort of explanation.

The story begins many years ago, at a time when I worked as desk clerk in a hotel where a number of merchant seamen would generally be staying while they were looking for a ship. Among them there was one particular seaman of about my own age with whom I became quite friendly after he returned to the hotel one evening to find me working on a manuscript. It seemed that he had a great enthusiasm for literature, and on that evening we began a deep and thoroughgoing discussion of the subject, a discussion which was to continue off and on for the next few years whenever he was staying at the hotel.

Then one day he appeared with a manuscript of his own, and handing it to me, he told me to keep it and do with it as I pleased. I told him I would return it as soon as I had read it, but he told me no. He said it was mine to keep. I began to look through the manuscript but found it very difficult to make out. It was all hand written in pencil, and the pages were filled with corrections; whole sentences and paragraphs were scratched out and new ones were inserted in the margins and even on the backs of pages. It was such hard going that, after a brief attempt at reading it, I gave up and put the manuscript aside where I eventually forgot all about it.

I rediscovered it recently while going through some old papers and, upon looking it over and noticing for the first time that the true author had added my name to the manuscript as that of author, I decided that perhaps now I should make an all out effort and finally read the work. As I began, I was faced with another problem in that the numbering of the pages appeared to be completely haphazard. In fact, it almost looked as though several incomplete manuscripts had been mixed together in a random order, or even as though the author had dropped those manuscripts onto the floor and then gathered up the pages in whatever order he happened to find them. I read them in the order in which he had left them, though, and as I read, I saw that they were actually quite well organized in spite of the fact that they must have been written out of order and then put into order at some point later on.

The writing appeared a bit amateurish to me, as you will see when you read it, but I found the story itself to be quite interesting, which was what finally convinced me that perhaps the work deserved to be published. When I thought about proposing this to the author, though, I immediately realized that I hadn't seen him in years. Not, in fact, since that day long ago when he gave me the manuscript.

I decided to contact his union hall to find out if they could help me locate him, but when I asked them, they told me that they hadn't heard from him in years, either. Not since around the same time when I had seen him last. I questioned them further and got them to search their records, and I was eventually able to take away enough information to make it possible for me to locate his family. When I called them up and spoke to them, though, I was greatly surprised to find out that they hadn't seen or heard from him in all these years, either. I found it very odd that they had made no effort to locate him in all this time, but they told me that that was just the way

he was, always disappearing without a trace and then turning up again at some future date. And besides, before he had disappeared, he had made them promise not to report him missing or do anything at all to try to find him. And when I asked them what all this must mean, the only answer they could give me was that they had no idea whatsoever. They just hoped that he was okay and that someday he would reappear.

So wishing to respect what may very well have been his last request, I have decided not to give the name of the true author of this work or to reveal anything more about him beyond what he already revealed himself in his work. And I have left the manuscript exactly as he left it, with the pages in his order and with my own name listed as author. So in that spirit and in accordance with his desires, I now present “my” story, *Road Freek*.

G. Burton

PART I: THE RIVER

The river didn't care what happened to me. It didn't care whether I lived or died. But it wasn't hostile toward me, and it wasn't cruel. It was just indifferent, totally indifferent. It was itself, and all it did was what it always did. It continued to roll along, rolling and flowing its way toward the sea. And me? I was so small and so insignificant that it probably didn't even notice that I was here, floating along upon it on my little raft.

The hills and mountains ignored me, too. They too failed to notice my passage as I floated by. Why, even the trees and bushes that lined the banks seemed to ignore me. Even they seemed indifferent. And if any of them did sense my presence, it was clear that I meant nothing to them. They didn't care about me or my survival. They didn't care about me at all.

No, there was no one and nothing out here in this entire wilderness that cared about what happened to me. No one, that is, except me. Because I cared. I cared a great deal about whether or not I survived. I hadn't come out here to commit suicide. I'd come here for an adventure, for an experience, for a test. And I hoped that I'd be able to survive this test. I hoped this wouldn't be my last experience, floating down this river by myself in this remote part of the Yukon Territory, floating down this river on my clumsy little raft.

I knew I could expect no help from the river, though I expected no special harm from it, either. Because while I knew it would have no sympathy for me and no pity if I should make a mistake, at the same time, I knew that it held no antipathy toward me. I knew it would just continue to flow on in the same way it always had, leaving my fate completely up to me. And so my nerves were steeled and my senses were alert as I floated along, finally committing myself to the river voyage after already having spent a month in the bush.

During that month, I'd made two short trips along the river, crossing over to the north bank on my raft and exploring the area a bit, camping and hiking and prospecting among the hills and creeks on that side of the river. But today, I was beginning my journey back out of the wilderness. Today, I was going to float down the river to who-knows-where, to wherever the current might take me.

The river didn't help and it didn't hinder me as I paddled my raft out toward midstream. The only thing that hindered me in my progress was the raft itself, because while I'd made it as light and maneuverable as possible, and while I'd made it as small as I could safely make it, still it was a raft. Still it was awkward and hard to move through the water.

I'd made it from two trunks of standing deadwood, and then between those two I'd laid a third log taken from higher up the larger of the two trees. I'd added this third log for extra flotation and also to help the raft hold its shape, and with all three of the logs, I'd rounded off the ends to make them as hydrodynamic as possible. Across the tops of the logs, I'd made a platform of green poles, some of which I'd spiked into the logs using the spikes I'd brought along for that purpose, and the rest of which I'd tied on with marline. I'd made the whole thing just big enough to hold my gear and myself, with the gear piled up and tied onto the front half of the raft and me sitting down behind it. Then as a final touch, I'd whittled a paddle using my axe and spokeshave. And a fine looking and useful paddle it was, if I did say so myself.

But in spite of all the care I'd taken in its construction, it was still quite an effort to paddle it out into the middle of the river. So I'd gone a good distance downriver before I was finally able to sit back and relax and enjoy the view while I let the current do the work. While I floated along, an insignificant little speck that was far too small to draw the attention of the river or the mountains or anything else out here in this giant wilderness.

I'd floated along in this way for some time when I noticed that the current was carrying me over toward the south bank of the river. And now as I looked up ahead along the bank to see if there were any dangers in my path, my eyes immediately lit upon a sweeper, a tree which was laying out into the river, a tree which had had the bank cut out from underneath it by the current but which still held onto the bank by its roots. I saw that sweeper, and I saw that I was being carried directly at it. And since I knew that sweepers are one of the greatest dangers a person can face on a river like this, I immediately sprang into action. I immediately turned the nose of the raft toward the north bank of the river and began to paddle away as hard as I could.

The river was carrying me over into danger, right toward this thing that could kill me, but it did so without malice. It wasn't doing it because it wanted to hurt me. It cared nothing about me. It was doing it because this was what it always did to an object floating along with its current in this area. It had no time to bother itself with me and my little problems, and if it was even aware of my puny efforts to save myself, it probably found them laughable. But I couldn't help it if I was being ridiculous, because paddling was the only thing I could do in a situation like this. I didn't have the soft, flowing, yielding power of the river. I was a hard object, one that could be thrown into the river and drowned if it struck that sweeper. And so I had no choice but to fight the power of the river and try to paddle my way out of danger. It was the only way I could save myself.

I paddled with all my strength. I paddled for all I was worth, but still I was closing in on the sweeper. I put all my power, all my will to survive into my paddling, but still the sweeper drew ever nearer. Closer and closer until finally, I hit. Hit but not directly, as all I hit were the thin upper branches of the tree, the part where the tree was weak. And so the raft and I, being driven on by the power of the current, were able to push our way right through and continue on downriver, upright and unharmed.

So I'd survived the first great danger I'd encountered on the river. And while no one and nothing out here in this wilderness shared with me now in my sense of relief, still I was very happy with the outcome.

I continued paddling until I'd once again regained midstream, and then I stopped and sat back once again to enjoy the scenery. I watched the trees and the hills and the mountains go by. I watched them, and I watched the river, and I let it draw me along through this wild land. And then after a time, I noticed that the river was once again pushing me toward one of its banks—toward the north bank this time—and as I looked up ahead, I saw that there was another sweeper in my path. Or to be more correct, I saw that there were two sweepers in my path.

And so once again I found myself paddling with all my might. I found myself making feeble efforts to save myself from the danger toward which the river was so irresistibly carrying me. This river without pity or animosity or any of the other human emotions. This river that

might kill me in the next few minutes, but that would do so with absolute indifference. I paddled toward the south bank as though my life depended on it. I paddled as hard as I possibly could on that clumsy raft. But just like before, I was drawn closer and closer to the sweeper in spite of all my efforts. And just like before, I ended up striking the sweeper. I ended up striking both of them. But also just like before, I only struck them in the thin upper branches where I was able to pass through unscathed. And so one more time, I found that I'd managed to survive one of the river's dangers. I found that I'd managed to preserve my life, to preserve it long enough to be able to face the next danger that the river might throw into my path.

As I continued my journey down the river, I continued to repeat this same pattern over and over again. I continued to find myself being swept toward dangers by the current, toward sweepers or, in one case, toward a small rapids along the edge of a sandbar. Each time I paddled for all I was worth, and each time my efforts proved to be just enough to save me, just enough to where I merely brushed along the edge of the danger rather than hitting it squarely. Each time my self-absorbed little struggle for survival triumphed, though just barely.

Then after I'd been on the river for a number of hours, and after I'd gone many miles downriver, I began to get an uncomfortable feeling in the pit of my stomach. It was a feeling that seemed to be telling me it was time to get off the river for awhile, a feeling like maybe it was time to stop and do a little exploring by land before continuing any further downriver. And it was a feeling that not only told me to get off the river, but also to do so on the south bank rather than the north one. I didn't know where the feeling was coming from. I didn't know if maybe the river or the mountains were speaking to me and warning me of some hidden danger. Because while rivers and mountains don't speak in the way that people do, they're not silent, either. They keep no secrets from anyone, and everything they know is there for a person to learn just as long as that person knows how to listen.

I began to paddle slowly and easily toward the south bank. But the further I was carried down the long straight stretch of the river where I presently was—the closer I was carried to the sharp bend up ahead where the river disappeared from view—the more urgency I felt to reach the bank. I felt like I had to reach it before the bend, and so I was soon paddling as hard as I could, paddling for the shore with nearly the same desperation that I'd felt earlier in trying to avoid the sweepers. I paddled and paddled and was finally able to beach the raft just a couple hundred yards before the bend.

There were no trees along this stretch of the bank, so as I got off the raft, I grabbed the wooden stake I always kept handy and, after driving it into the gravel along the edge of the river, I tied the raft off to it. Next I pulled out my rifle from among my gear and then with it and a canteen for equipment, I set out walking along the bank to see what exactly lay up ahead of me along the river. I set out to see if there really was any danger like the one the river seemed to have warned me about.

The spot where I'd landed was a big, flat meadow with a few trees scattered about in it, a meadow that extended out for some distance in all directions. And a little ways downriver, there was a high, forested ridge that rose up just before the bend in the river. I immediately headed for the ridge and began to climb it, hoping that from the top I'd be able to see the river for miles ahead. It was an easy climb, not too steep and not too long, and as I climbed, I felt good and

relaxed. I felt some of the tension of being out on the river begin to leave me. I felt like now I was back in my element. Now I was away from the forces of the river, and all I needed was my strong legs to propel me along over this good, solid ground. And even though I was being swarmed by mosquitoes as I walked, mosquitoes which had begun attacking me as soon as I'd reached the bank, still I didn't mind them if they were the price I had to pay to be on land. And besides, I'd gotten used to their presence during my month in the bush, a presence which had been constant with the exception of the last few hours that I'd just spent out on the river.

When I reached the top of the ridge, I looked around at the spectacular view, and I especially looked downriver. When I did so, though, I didn't see any particular problems in that direction. The river looked much the same down there as it had been further up. But then as I looked immediately below the ridge, I thought that maybe I saw something. I thought I saw some rocks or some rapids or something, though it was hard to tell since my view was partially obstructed by trees and by the shape of the ridge. So after climbing back down the ridge on the same side I'd just come up, I began to walk along the bank of the river. I walked along between the river and the base of the ridge until I reached the bend, and then no sooner had I made the turn than I saw what it was that the river had warned me about. I saw the rapids that lay just beyond the bend. Not a very big one and not a very dangerous one, as the only real obstacles it contained were three or four big boulders. It would have been a very easy thing for an experienced person in a canoe to have shot right through it. But as for me and my clumsy little raft, it would have been suicide to have even tried. And it would have been thanks to nothing but pure luck if I'd survived the attempt.

So the river was right. Or maybe I should say that whatever it was, whatever instinct that had just told me to get off the river was right. Because maybe it wasn't really the river or the mountains that had told me about it at all. Maybe the situation actually had a more mundane explanation. Like maybe I'd stopped because I could tell by the looks of the bend that there was something there. Maybe there was something about the form of the ridges and mountains around it that had warned me, though if that was the case, I certainly hadn't been aware of having seen anything special. And then there was always the possibility that I might have heard the rapids and been warned about them in that way. That could be it, though it seemed a bit hard to believe since this was such a quiet rapids. Why, as I'd approached it, I'd seen it at the same time as I'd heard it, and even now as I was standing on the bank right beside it, I could barely hear it at all.

No, I really don't think that I was warned by anything I saw or heard, whether subconsciously or in any other way. I think it was the river that talked to me. I think it was the river that warned me.

As I looked at the rapids, I could see that this was the end of the line for me. I could see that I wouldn't be going any further down the river. Because there was no way I could shoot those rapids on my little raft, and if I decided to build a new raft down below the rapids, it would only take me as far as the next set of rapids where I'd have to stop and build still another raft. And in that way, I'd probably run out of food before I could ever reach civilization. So why should I take that chance when I didn't have to, when I was still within walking distance of the North Canol Road? Why should I take any more chances on the river, and why should I go any further away from the road when I could always walk there in a few days from the spot where I stood right now?

And so my decision was made. I was finished with the river. I'd floated down it as far as I was going to go. And if that meant that I'd failed this test or whatever it was that I was putting myself through, then so be it. But I was finished with throwing my fate to the whims of the river. From here on out, it was up to my legs to do the work. It was up to them to get me back to civilization.

I returned to the raft and began untying and unloading my gear, hauling it up the low riverbank and then looking around for a good campsite. But seeing how one site was about as good as any other in this big meadow, I just plopped my gear down at the first place I came to. I thought about setting up camp but knew that there was really very little to set up. There weren't enough trees around here for me to tie my plastic sheet up between a pair of them and use it as a tent. And in any case, I'd only be here for one night, so there was no point in going to all that trouble. I'd just lay my sleeping bag down on one part of the sheet and then have the rest of it ready to pull over me in case it should rain during the night. One thing I should do now, though, was to build a fire since it might do something to chase away a few of the mosquitoes that were swarming thicker and thicker all the time. It seemed like they were worse over here than they'd been on the north bank of the river. And when I also considered the fact that it was now late June and that prime mosquito season was just beginning, I knew that they were going to be a serious inconvenience for me on my walk back to civilization. I knew that the swarms I'd dealt with up until now had been nothing compared to what still lay in store for me.

In preparation for building the fire, I walked over to the nearest tree and began to break off its dead lower branches. And when I had as many of them as I wanted to carry, I walked back to camp where I soon broke the branches up into firewood. After that I got the spokeshave out of my backpack and began shaving away at one of the branches, making shavings which I piled up in the spot that I'd chosen for the campfire. And once the pile of shavings was big enough, I began to pile on twigs and small branches. And then finally, with a single match, I brought my old friend the fire back to life.

I wasn't sure whether this was actually the same fire being reborn each day at each of my campsites or whether it was a different fire every time. But whichever it was, I always appreciated the company. And it, too, seemed glad to see me each time. It was grateful to me for having created the conditions that had allowed its birth—or its rebirth, as the case may be—and so it was more than willing to sit there with me and keep me company. It was willing to listen to me and share whatever thoughts I might have, whether they be my tepid reflections on life and its meaning or recollections from my past. The fire was generous, and it didn't judge. It merely sat and reflected my thoughts. It shared them with me, and it never let on how it felt about what I was thinking.

The thoughts I wanted to share at this particular moment were practical ones, so as soon as the fire was big enough to take care of itself, I pulled out my map and began to study it, looking for the shortest route back to the road. When I'd been out on the river, I'd been very careful to keep track of my progress, spotting the hills and mountains on the map as I'd passed them, so that now I knew exactly where I was. And since I knew that, and since I also knew where the road was, it became a very simple procedure to lay out a course that would take me from here to there. And once I had the route laid out and the direction measured, all I had to do was to get out my compass and take a sight in that direction. But when I did so, I found that my

view was blocked by the ridge that ran for some distance along the back side of the meadow. I found that I wasn't able to see my route, wasn't able to see the big ridge off in the distance or the gap in that ridge where I'd be crossing it. I couldn't see them, and I wouldn't see them unless I were to walk all the way around this nearby ridge, which was something I wasn't going to do right now. It was something I would save for tomorrow when I had to walk over that way anyway, when I had to begin walking along the route that I'd just laid out.

Well, now that that's out of the way, what should we think about next, fire? How about food? That's always a good, basic, practical consideration. Maybe I should start thinking about preparing supper.

Yes, supper. A supper of beans and rice, because that was what it was going to be. Beans and rice were just about the only food I still had left by now, and they were what I would be eating for every meal. The flour was long gone, and the honey, and so were the carrots and onions, and there was only about enough oatmeal left for one more meal. And besides that little bit of oatmeal, the only things I had left to eat were some spices and a bottle of vitamins and a handful of dried apricots. Just that and a whole lot of beans and rice, enough of them to last me for the next two weeks or so. But now as I thought about my food situation, I knew that I actually had one other choice. I knew that there was one other thing I could eat for supper tonight: there were the fish in the river. And since this would be my last day by the river, maybe I should take advantage of the opportunity and eat one last fish.

Knowing how long it took to cook the dried beans I had with me, and knowing that I'd better get started right away, I pulled the cooking pot out of my backpack and then reached into the old duffel bag where I kept the food and came up with the sack of beans. I poured some of them into the pot, enough for supper tonight and breakfast tomorrow since I wanted to save my single serving of oatmeal for some special occasion. After the beans, I poured in all the water I had left in my canteens, and finally I covered the pot and set it down on the fire to begin the long, slow process of cooking the beans without having soaked them beforehand. I watched and waited as the water began to boil, and then I stopped feeding the fire, letting my friend gradually die down to coals. I didn't have time for conversation right now. I'd be able to talk to it later, because right now I had chores to do, chores like fetching water and catching a fish. And chores like breaking up the raft with which I was now finished.

When my friend the fire was nearly gone, I walked down to the little creek near the bend in the river and filled my canteens. And when I returned and saw it still smoldering along, getting lower and lower all the time, I decided that it was a good chance for me to grab my axe and go down to the river and take care of the raft.

As I reached the bank and looked down onto the raft sitting there, I was suddenly struck by the realization of just how final this moment actually was. My trip on the river was over. My adventure, my test, or whatever else I might call it. It was over, and it would never be repeated. It was already fading into history, and at that moment I felt a great solemnity. I felt like I wanted to perform a ceremony of some sort, something to mark this moment and say goodbye to the raft and the river. Something to say goodbye and to thank the river for having spared me.

Of course, I knew that anything I did would be silly, and I also knew that the river wouldn't care. I knew it probably wouldn't even notice whatever I did to thank it. And at the same time, I knew it hadn't spared me out of any feeling of kindness or generosity or anything like that. I knew it had only spared me because I'd saved myself, because I'd managed to paddle my way out of its dangers, and because I'd listened to its warning about the rapids—a warning it offers to one and all without distinction. So I really had no reason to thank it, but still I felt a strong urge to do so, because while the river was above all human feelings and emotions, I wasn't. And as the gesture would mean something to me at least, I resolved to thank it as I broke up the raft, to thank it for having spared me, and to thank it for what it had taught me.

I set about untying and unwrapping the marline that held so much of the raft together, and as each of the poles came free, I held it up and threw it out into the river, saying, "Here, this is for you. Do with it as you please." The ceremony seemed a bit more ridiculous to me each time I repeated it, and as the mosquitoes were swarming worse and worse all the time, I soon began to rush my way through it. When I had all the marline untied, I coiled it up to take it back with me, the same as I'd done with the rope I'd used to tie the raft to shore. And once that was done, I began to knock out the four spiked poles with the back of my axe, knocking them loose and stacking them up on the bank. Then when all the poles were off, I shoved the three big logs out into the river with my foot, wishing them well as they went and offering them up to the river in the same way I'd just offered up the poles. And with that, the raft was gone. Everything was gone but the paddle and the poles with the spikes through them.

Those spikes didn't seem like a proper offering to the river, but since I didn't want to carry them back with me, either, I finally decided to just leave them right where they were. And as far as the paddle went, it seemed like it might be best to leave it there, too. It was way too nice to just throw it out into the river, and leaving it where it was seemed like a good way to mark the spot where my journey had ended. I'd leave it there, and I'd let fate do with it as it pleased, whether that meant sitting there till it rotted or being swept away at some future date or being found and taken away by some group of canoeists that might appear on this lightly traveled river. Whatever it was going to be, it didn't matter to me any more. It was no longer my concern. I was finished with the paddle just like I was finished with the adventure.

So I left it and returned to my friend the fire to see how it was doing. I sat down beside the fire hoping it would help chase away some of the mosquitoes, but by now it had died down so far that it wasn't putting out enough smoke to have much effect at all. I sat and checked the beans, adding more water and trying to calculate how much time I still had left before they would be ready, and also trying to decide what to do in the meantime. And soon I was back on my feet, pulling out and assembling my little fold-up fishing pole and heading down toward the river once again.

I found a likely looking eddy close to the bank and began to cast my spinner into it, and in no time at all, I was reeling in a good-sized grayling. It was always this way when I fished in this river. It never took me more than a few minutes to catch my supper. I took the fish off the hook and carried it back to camp, and as I did so, I apologized to it for killing it. I apologized and explained that I hadn't done so for sport or for spite. I explained that I'd killed it for food, which I think it must have understood to be a justifiable reason for this homicide.

Back at camp, I made more shavings with my spokeshave and used them to bring the fire back to full, blazing life. Then I set about cooking my meal, adding rice to the beans at the appropriate moment and gutting and scaling the fish before tossing it into the frying pan. And then once the meal was cooked, and once it was eaten, I sat back to hold my nightly conversation with my friend the fire.

Well old friend, it looks like the trip is over. The trip, the adventure, whatever you want to call it. It's finished. And not only is the trip over, but I feel like a whole phase of my life is over, too. I feel like this is the end of everything I've been doing and everything I've been building up to for the last ten years or so. I feel like that whole part of my life is over, like now it's time for me to start out on a brand new life, or something like that.

And this thing that I've just been through, this adventure, this test... Yes, that's what you could call it: a test. This test has been like the last phase of that old life. This test has been like the final exam of the entire life I've been leading up until now.

Wait a minute, did I just call it a test? What do I mean by that? And what was I really testing myself for out there on the river? Was I just trying to see how stupid I could be and still survive? Was I trying to see what an idiotic stunt I could pull and still somehow live to tell about it? Because after all, floating down a river alone in a wilderness like this, and especially doing so on an unmanageable little raft like that one I built. Why, it's all just too stupid for words! The truth of the matter is that I'm lucky to be alive right now. That's what the truth of the matter is, isn't it?

The fire didn't say a word. The fire just listened.

And to call this thing an adventure, that's another dumb word to use. Because I know by now, and I've known for years, that adventure doesn't exist. There's no such thing. It's nothing but a word. I learned that years ago, back when I first went out on the road, and when I first told people about my experiences. And especially when I told them about the more unpleasant ones. Because to me, that was all they were: they were experiences, some of them pleasant and some of them not. But then as I told people about them, they'd say, Wow, what an adventure! And it struck me right then and there that the only adventure is the story, that an experience only becomes an adventure in the retelling, while in the living moment, it's nothing but an experience. It's nothing but another episode in your life.

So this trip on the river can't be called an adventure. It's been an experience and that's all. Just another experience. Though quite an experience it's been when you get right down to it. I mean, this coming out into the wilderness alone, and especially out into a wilderness like this one. Because like, look at that north bank of the river and the weeks I spent over there. Why, in the whole time I was there, I never saw a single sign of humanity, not one thing to indicate that I wasn't the first person who'd ever been there. That's a truly rare experience. And then of course, there was this little trip down the river. It was something, too, though probably nowhere near as amazing as the time I spent over on the north bank. But it's all been amazing when you get right down to it, truly amazing. It's all been... It's been an extreme experience, a peak experience. Why, maybe you could even call it a life-defining experience, or a religious experience, if you

prefer that expression. It's all been like one long, drawn out religious experience. It's... Or could you really call it that? Do you think you could call it that? A religious experience?

The fire maintained its silence, merely listening without comment and without judgment.

No, I don't think so, either. Not really. Because the word religious is nothing but a label, just another stupid, subjective label. And labels are meaningless. They're of no importance whatsoever. I mean, the only thing that counts is the experience itself, right? And if I choose to label it as religious or as a peak experience or anything else like that, why that means nothing. It's just my own stupidity at work here. The label itself is nothing. It's like saying that it was a good experience or a bad one. It doesn't matter. Those are just empty words. They have nothing to do with the actual experience. And in the end, it's the experience itself that really counts.

It's the living, that's what life is all about. It's the living and the doing and the being. It's the being alive and the seeing and the feeling and all the rest of it. It's the experience in and of itself. Or maybe I should actually say that it's the Experience! with a capital E and an exclamation point. Do you know what I'm talking about here? I'm talking about that type of Experience! that I was so heavily into back in my younger days—back in my hippie days. That type of gotta-do-everything-at-least-once Experience! That type of good-or-bad-doesn't-matter-as-long-as-it's-new-and-intense Experience! That type of hunger-for-life-in-any-form Experience! That's what I'm talking about.

And so maybe that's what this trip has really been about all along. Maybe the whole thing has been nothing but one long Experience! Maybe it's been nothing but my latest Experience! My latest and my greatest—and quite possibly my last.

CHAPTER ONE (Second Try)

I was born at the age of eighteen. Or rather, my birth process began at that age, since that was the age at which I made my first feeble attempts at thinking for myself. I had been alive before that—physically alive—but I hadn't been a person. I'd been a middle-class, middle-of-the-road, middle-American robot who did and thought exactly what I was programmed to do and to think. I'd gone to school, and I'd gone to church. I'd believed in God and country and all the rest, and I'd done as I was told and kept my nose clean. And during all that time, during all those years, I'd never had a single thought that could truly be called my own.

It wasn't until I was eighteen that I finally left the womb and began thinking for myself, but even then I was very slow emerging since my naively accepting nature had made it possible for me to become very deeply and methodically programmed. I didn't just wake up as a human being one day, but rather I went through a series of small awakenings that led me slowly toward my humanity.

Although now that I think about it, I suppose I did catch a few glimpses of life even earlier, caught them while I was out on weekend cruises around the bay and summer cruises down the coast with the Sea Scouts. Those glimpses were very short-lived, though, as short-lived as the cruises themselves, and they were always followed by my return to that state of neither-life-nor-death that we call high school. But at least I saw enough of life in my Sea Scout days to

know that after high school, I didn't want another four or five years of educational brain-death followed by a lifetime of quiet desperation in a conventional job. No, I wanted something else. I wanted to live. I wanted to run away to sea. And in the end, that's what I did. Or at least I sort of ran away to sea, which was the most that a person as conventional and brainwashed as myself could possibly do.

I got a letter of commitment to the Sailors' Union of the Pacific through a friend of a friend in Sea Scouts, and with that letter I got my seaman's papers. But then when I told my parents about my decision, they took it very hard. They argued and pleaded and begged me to get an education, and so with me being the good son I was, I soon backed down—backed down halfway and promised them that I'd only go to sea part-time and that I'd attend junior college between trips.

And it was during those years when I was both shipping out and attending JC, between the ages of eighteen and twenty, that I was very slowly born as a thinking human being.

(Fragments)

I stood by the rail and peered into the fog but there was nothing to see, nothing but thick, pea-soup fog. The fog horn on the bridge sounded once again, and it sounded like we must be right next to it, like we must be passing under the bridge right then and there. But still I couldn't see a thing, the fog was that thick. Then as I happened to look up, I saw a dark shadow just passing overhead. The shadow passed over and was gone again in a moment, but no sooner had I seen it than I knew: it's the Golden Gate! I'm home!

I felt an immediate thrill of jubilation at the trip being over, but at the same time, I felt sad because I had truly enjoyed the trip. It had been perhaps the best time of my life so far, and this in spite of all the hard work and the living three to a room. It had been a sort of golden period for me where I'd come closer to true happiness than I'd ever been before, closer than I'd ever come again perhaps. And it wasn't because of the exotic ports or the adventure, either—the adventure of playing war far behind the lines in Vietnam, for example. No, the thing that had made the trip so enjoyable had been the time spent at sea. Yes, the sea-time, that was the thing I'd truly come to treasure.

The slight clearing in the fog soon died out and I thought about going back inside out of the cold, damp air. But no, I preferred to stay out on deck where I could be alone with my thoughts, where I could enjoy my precious solitude this one last time before returning to The World. Because I knew that I'd have few more opportunities for quiet contemplation, very few, once I was back ashore living in the "real" world and being subjected to all its distractions.

So being that this was my last opportunity, I began to reflect upon the voyage and the things that I felt I'd learned. In doing so, my first thoughts were of all the time I'd spent reading and contemplating and of all the books I'd read. And of those books, Samuel Butler's immediately came to mind as the one that had had the greatest impact on me, an impact even greater than the one made by Dostoevsky. Because there had been something about it that had struck a basic chord within me, something that had made me identify very deeply with its naïve young hero as he slowly and painfully discovered the small-minded hypocrisy of the Victorian

English society in which he lived. It had been the first book I'd read on the trip, and it had also been the first book I'd ever read that had made me want to ask serious questions about society and values and all the rest.

And as I stood out on deck in the fog, I remembered all the time I'd spent thinking about values, about the falseness of material values and the true importance of intellectual and spiritual values, and I thanked Butler for having opened my eyes to that. But even as I was thanking him, I knew that I was thanking the wrong person. I knew that he hadn't been the one who'd really taught me that particular lesson. No, it had been someone else, and in my attempt to identify that someone, I thought of Bacon and his advice about seeking first the good things of the mind. But even before I'd gotten that phrase out, I found another image flashing into my mind. It was the image of a cabdriver, of all people, the image of that cabdriver in the Philippines. What was he doing here? I asked myself, here in the company of Bacon and Butler and other distinguished thinkers?

He'd hardly been a thinker, and during the time I'd been with him, he hadn't said anything the least bit profound or memorable. But still there had been something about him that had made an impression on me, something that had made him stand out as one of my teachers. And in fact, he'd already stood out there in Subic Bay, our first foreign port—Subic Bay, that jungle of whores and hustlers and assorted lowlifes. What a shock that place had been to a good Catholic boy like me! But he'd been different from all those money-grubbers in Olongapo. He'd been so happy and so contented with his lot in life, and so satisfied with his rather low standard of living. And his almost beatific contentment with life had served as a practical demonstration of the falseness of material values.

His being poor but happy had struck me as an irreconcilable contradiction at the time, and I'd had to think about it a lot afterwards. I'd spent a lot of time reasoning and arguing with myself until one day when I'd suddenly come to the realization that I myself was living out that same contradiction everyday aboard ship. I was living a very deprived life materially, having nothing to call my own but my clothes and my books, but still I was constantly rising to new levels of happiness, to levels I'd never known before. And so maybe it wasn't such a contradiction after all. Maybe the contradiction was all a figment of my imagination—or a figment of my education.

I looked around the deck and thought about going inside, but in spite of the chill I was getting, I was in no hurry to leave. I was in no hurry for the trip to end, in no hurry to return to a society in which I was no longer sure that I had a place. I didn't know what was wrong, whether there was something wrong with society or something wrong with me, but the one thing I knew for sure was that I'd never be able to fit back in. I'd never be able to go back and be the same old cog in the machine that I'd been before after all the changes I'd been through on this trip.

And so I stayed out on deck, stayed out in the cold, damp, fog-laden air for awhile longer, for a little while longer.

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I didn't want to argue with Grampa. He was the one man I'd always admired most in the world, and he was the last person I'd ever want to argue with, but the things he was saying were just too much for me. I couldn't let them pass unchallenged.

"But Grampa, those people weren't out destroying things or overthrowing the government or anything like that. All they did was make a park. I don't see why you have to shoot em for that."

He answered me somehow, but I really don't remember what he said, either then or for the rest of the day. All I remember is the look that came into his eyes when he heard those words. It was a look of such surprise and such pain, a look that revealed such a deep sense of betrayal, that it nearly broke my heart. Because at that moment, he could see the awful truth, the truth that was now becoming apparent even to me. He could see that I'd gone over to the other side.

Grampa always believed whatever the police said about events like People's Park, just as you'd expect when given the fact that he was an old cop himself, a retired Highway Patrolman who'd patrolled the roads around the valley for many years. He always accepted the police version at face value, with no questions asked, and I'd always done the same up until that moment. I'd always agreed with him and with the police without ever giving the matter any real thought, but this time things were different.

Ever since I'd gotten off that ship, everything had been different. Everything had seemed different to me. I'd felt like I was an outsider visiting from some distant land, and I'd often felt like I was seeing things for the first time, seeing them through fresh new eyes. And now, looking at what was happening in Berkeley through those eyes, I felt my sympathies going wholeheartedly over to the demonstrators and against the police. That's what I felt, and that's what I told Grampa, even though I knew it would hurt him deeply to hear it. Even though I knew it would hurt him and hurt me, too.

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I went ashore in Thailand with Jake, our Third Mate fresh out of the state maritime academy, who was about the only person on that ship besides me who wasn't interested in heading straight for the bars and the whores. Instead he talked about visiting some old ruined temple outside of town, a place we could reach by hitchhiking. I didn't take us long to get there. People were friendly and rides came easily. And then just as we were walking the last little stretch up the hill, who should come by riding on a rented motorcycle but Tom, our Third Engineer and a classmate of Jake's. It seemed like more than a coincidence to me, but I didn't say anything about it at the time. I just went along with the two of them as we wandered about the deserted ruins for a few minutes before sitting down to take a rest in a shady, secluded spot.

Now, I should have known what was coming next given the company I was in, but the truth is that I was just too naïve to suspect a thing. I mean, Jake was probably the closest thing to a pure hippie I'd ever met, and for a long time he served as a model in my mind of what a hippie is like, or at least of what one should be like. He was the kindest, gentlest person I'd ever known, and he really seemed to love everyone he met and to want to help them in any way he could. He was always the guy who befriended the outcasts and the losers and made them feel that they

belonged, which probably explained why he had befriended me on this ship: because he could see how terribly lost and confused I was, how unsure I was of just where I fit into the scheme of things. And in addition to Jake the Hippie, there was Tom who, while not exactly a hippie, was one of the hippest people I'd ever met. He was a surfer who didn't act like a surfer, one who had none of that phony surfer-hipness, but instead one whose actions came out of a quiet, deep-seated hipness.

So given the fact that I was sitting on the remains of an ancient stone wall in an isolated spot with those two guys, it should have come as no surprise to me when they lit up a joint and began passing it around. And it also should have come as no surprise when Jake offered it to me. But the fact is that it did come as a surprise, as such a surprise that my only reaction to the offer was a purely automatic, unconscious refusal. Because while on the inside I'd been going through tremendous changes in the ways I thought and felt, on the outside I was still the straightest of straight arrows, and my actions remained exactly the same as they'd always been.

I immediately regretted having refused the joint, but it wasn't until a few rounds later, when Jake asked me if I was sure I didn't want to try it, that I was able to change my decision. Tom began protesting to Jake not to pressure me, but before he could even finish his sentence, I was already accepting the joint and taking a hit.

It seemed like Jake could see what was happening inside me, could see that my straightness was only skin-deep and that inside I was a whole different person. He could see inside me just like that hippie girl back in high school had been able to. I remember that she was one of the very few hippies in that square little town, and I remember how one day she'd been telling a friend of mine that she could just see him going hippie within the next year or so. And upon hearing that, I'd asked her what about me, would I go hippie, too? And she'd replied, "You already are a hippie. You just don't realize it yet." Well, Jake could see through me in exactly the same way that she had. He could see that there was a hippie inside me who was just waiting to come out.

I took a toke every time Jake handed me the joint, and after awhile, the guys asked me if I was feeling it yet, a question to which I answered yes even though the truth was that it didn't seem to be having much effect on me at all. After the joint was gone, we sat and talked for awhile before getting up to explore what was left of the old temple, before setting out to walk all around the crumbled walls and the fallen stones and to see what we could find.

A short time later, Tom yelled at the two of us from a distance, "Hey, come over here and look at this." Jake and I began to run toward him, and as we did so, the strangest thing started to happen to me. Because as I ran along, I could see the distance in front of me expanding. I could see Tom getting farther and farther away, just like in a dream where you can never reach the point you're running for. But this wasn't a dream, it was reality, so I soon reached him and the old stone carvings that he wanted us to see. And after looking at those carvings for a minute or so, I looked over at Jake and told him that, yes, I certainly was feeling the effects of that joint.

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The sign said that anyone who preferred not to go on next week's class field trip to a military museum located in a neighboring town should sign up with the instructor, Mr. Dawson. I happened to discuss it with a classmate of mine named Pat, and he said that we should go sign up. When the two of us arrived in Mr. Dawson's office, though, we found out that the process wasn't quite as simple as the sign had implied, and no sooner had we announced our intentions to him than he asked us why we didn't want to go. Now, speaking for myself, I probably would have told him that I thought the tour would last too long and that I had better things to do with my time, and at the most extreme, I might have said that I thought the museum had very little bearing on the subject matter of the course. But as it turned out, it was Pat who spoke for both of us and Pat, being a budding pacifist, answered the question by saying, "We don't want to see a museum that glorifies killing people."

Being a former military man himself, Mr. Dawson hit the ceiling when he heard that, and he immediately tore into us with all the passion of one who still truly believes in the military system despite his own failures within that system, despite his having been forced to resign his commission without having reached retirement. Pat answered him just as passionately with arguments about right and wrong, and Dawson spoke about his own definitions of those terms, and so the thing went on and on. At one point, Dawson asked Pat if he had a copy of the Communist Manifesto in his back pocket, and he was even harsher with me on the few occasions when I tried to add something to the conversation. And finally he ended the whole thing by promising us that, though in good conscience he couldn't give us failing grades in his class, he'd talk to the dean about trying to get us expelled from the school. That and he'd also write to the local draft board and ask them to review our status, to see if there was any way our student deferments could be revoked.

TRIPPING

Jake called me up one day and invited me to a party in the woods that a group of his friends from the academy were organizing. I got a ride up the night before with Mike, who Jake had told me I could bring along, and we joined a few others there to occupy the isolated spot along a creek in the Sierras where the party was to take place. Meanwhile the rest of them, including a guy named Steve and a whole group of his friends from Sacramento, would be coming up the next day. On the morning of the party, Tom and another guy drove over to Tahoe to score some drugs, and when they got back around midday, Steve and some of his friends were already there unloading a generator and guitars and amps.

Shortly after Tom's return, Jake came up to Mike and me and held out his hand in front of us with a couple hits of acid. Neither of us had ever dropped before, but we were both more than primed to do so now as it was something that we'd often heard and thought about, and as we also knew that this was an ideal setting for a first trip. So we took the pills from him and swallowed them without a moment's hesitation.

Mike and I continued to hang around together while we waited for the acid to come on. The two of us had very little in common, and I was never really sure why we'd taken to hanging out together at college other than the fact that we were in so many classes together that we'd gotten used to each other. Our friendship had very little depth, though, and we quickly drifted far apart during the next semester when we no longer shared any classes.

We hung around and walked around and waited, and after awhile I began to feel something coming on. I began to feel stoned and happy and carefree, so happy that I stopped to take off my shoes and splash around in the creek while marveling at the sunlight reflecting off the water and at the odd sensations that came from the cold water on my feet. Mike splashed right along beside me, and he also accompanied me when I went over to sit down on a big rock in the middle of the creek. Mike sat down first while I stripped off my clothes before joining him—I was very big on nudity at the time, and I would often sit around my room naked. I sat there on the rock and felt the hot sun on my body, and I felt fantastic as the effects of the acid kept building and building.

After awhile one of the girls who had come up with Steve came to the creek-side, and when she saw me, she let out a scream. And no sooner had she screamed than Mike pushed me off the rock and into the water. I got back up and some of the other guys said, Hey, it's no big thing, it's just nudity, that's all. But the girl had turned her back and wouldn't turn around again, so I had to put my clothes on before sitting back down on the rock.

I sat there and the acid just kept coming on stronger and stronger, sending my mind into higher and higher gears, sending it way beyond the frontiers of any of my previous drug experiences. And as the acid rushed through my brain, more of Steve's friends arrived and the party began. They laughed and yelled, and they fired up the generator, and the noise soon drove me from my perch on the rock and sent me wandering around the periphery of the camping area, searching for a quiet spot. Because I was already receiving such a huge sensory overload from the acid that the noise from the party was just too much for me.

I began walking up the path that ran alongside the creek, and after I'd gone some distance, I came upon Tony, stony Tony who, in his typical laid-back Hawaiian style, was peacefully floating on his back in a spot where the creek formed a deep, quiet pool. He said hello and told me that I should come on in, the water was great, and I hesitated for a moment, not knowing how to answer him.

My mind was now functioning on a level where the symbols it called up presented themselves to me with the vividness of visions, so that each time I thought about the party going on back at the campsite, I saw a vision of a city. I saw a city with all its noise and hustle and crowding, and I felt all the repulsion that I'd always felt toward cities. And now as I thought about Tony, I saw a vision of the country, of farmhouses and pastures and tranquility. But though this vision was far more attractive to me than the previous one, it still wasn't what I wanted at all. No, I wanted to go on, to keep pushing on toward the frontier in the same way my family had always kept pushing on toward the west. I wanted to leave the city and go beyond the country, way beyond it, right out into the wilderness, right out into nature. And so I declined Tony's invitation and continued on my way up the path.

As I walked on, my head was filled with visions of myself as a pioneer heading out the Oregon Trail in a covered wagon, or no, as a mountain man riding off into the wilds to trade with the Indians, or to live with the Indians, or to become an Indian. Or no, I saw myself returning even more completely to nature. I saw myself merging with it, becoming a part of it. I saw myself becoming nature itself.

I looked up the hill to my right and saw a lookout point, and no sooner had I seen it than I was on my way toward it. I charged up the hill, running as swiftly and gracefully as a deer, or at least imagining that I did so, as I soon saw myself actually turning into a deer. I reached the lookout point and stopped to look around—the noble buck surveying his domain—and in my survey, I spotted another lookout point further uphill and further upstream. I'd barely caught my breath from the run up the hill, but that didn't stop me from taking right off for the new point. I ran like a deer once again, and once again I stopped at the perch to survey my surroundings. I soon recovered from this latest uphill sprint and, feeling the urge to get moving once again, I picked out a likely-looking spot over on the other side of the creek and began running toward it.

I ran downhill and came to the creek and followed it until I found a spot where I could cross it by hopping from rock to rock. It wasn't a particularly difficult spot to cross the creek, but still as I was standing on the bank getting ready to take the first hop, my mind was suddenly and completely flooded by a wave of bad memories that flashed by at incredible speed. I vividly recalled—almost relived—each and every moment of failure I'd ever experienced in my entire life, and also each of the countless times my older brother had rubbed my nose in them. Each of the times he'd put me down and insulted me and reminded me of what a miserable failure I was and of how far inferior I was to him. And I felt such a tremendous insecurity at that moment that I was about to give up and turn away without even trying to cross the creek when suddenly I recalled one of my successes. I recalled being in Sea Scouts and steering the ship through a storm and doing such a good job of it that the Skipper had started calling me the ship's foul-weather helmsman. And I recalled how, from then on, he'd always called for me to steer whenever things got a little rough. I recalled that moment of triumph and, as I did so, I felt such a surge of power and self-confidence flow through me that crossing the creek became the easiest thing in the world. It became one of the easiest things I'd ever done.

I ran up the hill on that side until I reached the point I'd picked out earlier, and once again I stopped to look around. But no sooner had I caught my breath and picked out another point back over on the other side and a ways further up the creek than I was on my way once again. I crossed the creek again, flashing through a slightly shorter series of my many failures than previously before recalling one of my successes and then making the crossing. And once across, I ran uphill to my point where I began looking around for another point even further upstream on the other side, a point toward which I was soon running at my deer-like pace. And I continued to work my way up the creek in this way, running up the hills and then running back down them and crossing the creek and running uphill again, until I'd made dozens of crossings—and until I'd relived my ever shorter list of failures dozens of times.

I only had one minor accident along the way, and that was when a log I was jumping from gave way beneath me so that I got my feet wet in the creek. It was no big thing, but still it gave me some of the strangest sensations all day, what with the way my stoned-out mind was working at the time. Because reality was coming to me in flashes, each thought-moment coming in a flash that not only witnessed the present but also projected that present into the near future before returning to another present thought-moment. So as I stood on the log and began to jump, I saw myself jumping and landing on the far bank. I'm jumping and landing, I'm jumping and landing, I'm... uh-oh, something's happening, I'm jumping and not quite making it, something's happening, I'm not making it, I'm... the log is giving way, I'm not making it, the log is giving

way and I'm falling, I'm not making it, I'm falling into the water, I'm not making it, I'm falling, I'm in the water.

I followed the creek until I came to a spot where the road crossed it and where, seeing that people were camped there, I thought it best to start working my way back toward our own campsite. I more or less followed the road on the way back, though I made frequent detours up into the woods, still searching for that something: for that perfect spot I'd sought along the creek, or that perfect integration into nature, or that perfect whatever that I'd been seeking all day. I didn't know what it was or where it was, but the only thing I knew for sure was that it had to be somewhere out here in nature. And I loved nature. I loved it more than anything. I wanted to be with it. I wanted to become it. I wanted to hug the trees and kiss the dirt and do whatever else I could think of to express my love. I wanted to become one with it, to merge myself with it for all eternity.

But whatever it was that I sought, I never found it. And I finally reached camp with the acid rush long over and with my mind slowly and steadily coming down. Steve and his friends were all gone by now, so things were nice and quiet around the campsite. I found Tom and Tony and an old hometown friend of Jake's sitting around on some logs, and I joined them. No one was saying much—we were all too stoned to talk—but still I felt that there was a special type of closeness when I joined the group. And that closeness soon grew and multiplied and blossomed into a flood of love that completely overwhelmed me. I loved these guys, loved them more than anyone I'd ever known. And it wasn't just them that I loved, either. I loved them, and I loved Jake and Mike and the rest of the guys, and I loved this campsite, and I loved nature, and I loved the world and the universe and everything and everyone in it. I loved everything, but I especially loved Tom and Tony and Jake's friend because they were with me right now sharing this moment of unspoken love.

I knew that what I was feeling at this moment was the universal love that the hippies spoke of, the love that I, too, had often spoken of without ever knowing quite what I was talking about. I'd only known the word love up until this moment, but now I was learning what it really meant. Now I was learning what love really was. And not only was I learning this secret, but I was also sharing it with these guys sitting here with me. I was sharing the secret with them, and I was sharing the love.

I loved them so much at that moment of shared revelation that I wanted it to go on forever. I wanted to be with them forever, to spend my life with them, and it made me sad when I reminded myself that this couldn't be. We'd have to separate soon. We'd have to go away and live our own lives, and somehow that struck me as a deeply tragic fate. And I wanted to fight against that fate even though I knew it was impossible, even though I knew that separation was inevitable, because I didn't want this moment of love to perish.

But then I realized that even though this moment with Tom and the others was only temporary, at the same time it was also somehow eternal. Even though it would soon disappear, it would still continue to live on within me. And even more, it would continue to live on within itself, since this moment contained within itself the very seeds of eternity. Because what is eternity besides an endless succession of moments, and what is a moment besides a miniature eternity?

(Fragments)

On my next ship I met Eric, a guy whose friendship was to have a major impact upon my future development. He was someone I immediately admired—he was someone who everyone immediately admired or envied—and he was someone whose example I was only too glad to follow.

He was from a small mountain town, the son of a logger and, in addition to being a great physical specimen, he was also a great guy. He never bragged, and he never put anyone down—he had so much self-confidence that he had no need for those types of ego-crutches. He had solid, manly good looks, and whenever he spoke or acted, he exuded an air of quiet, unassuming masculinity, the type of masculinity that impresses both men and women. He was a natural leader who led strictly by example, and he never had any trouble finding people who wanted to follow him and be like him, because he was exactly what most young men dream of being. He was what I often dreamed of being. And though I knew from the start that I could never have his looks or his build or his quiet self-confidence, I found that I could at least be like him in one way. I found that I could adopt his positive attitude toward life.

Eric had a yes-attitude toward life; he automatically said yes to anything and everything that came along. Whenever someone would ask him if he wanted to do something, he'd immediately answer yes, which was exactly the opposite of my own automatic response. I had a no-attitude, which meant that my first reaction to anything new was always to say no, like for example that time at the temple when Jake had offered me that joint. My first reaction had been to say no, and it had only been after I'd had some time to think about it that my reply had eventually changed over to yes.

Eric always said yes immediately, without the least hesitation, and after I'd been around him for awhile, I came to realize that in saying yes, he wasn't simply saying it to the matter at hand, but he was actually saying yes to life itself. And in the same way that he was always saying yes, I was always saying no to life. I was always saying that I didn't want to do and see and experience and enjoy. I was always saying that I didn't want to truly live. And it was only after spending time with Eric that I was finally able to turn myself around and begin saying yes to life.

And fortunately for me, the time I spent with him wasn't restricted to the time we spent aboard ship, either, since shortly before we got off he invited me to come and live at his place, at the old house in the Sierras he shared with a couple of old friends and with a varying number of seamen who stayed there when they were between ships. I wanted to say yes to him as soon as he invited me, but I hesitated until he told me that there was a junior college within commuting distance of the place, a college where I'd be able to continue the "education" I'd promised my folks I would finish. And no sooner had he told me about that college than I was sold on the idea, the idea of finally leaving home altogether, of truly getting out on my own for the first time.

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Eric and I were sitting around the place one evening, drunk and stoned and with nothing to do, when he suggested that we go get some gas for his old pickup. I could tell by the way he

said it that he had some other plan in mind besides simply driving down to a gas station, and by this time I was so far advanced in my adoption of a yes-to-life attitude that I immediately agreed to go along.

We stumbled out to his truck and drove down to the railroad tracks, down to a secluded area along the tracks where the local work yard and motor pool was located. We parked a discreet distance away from the entrance gate and looked around to make sure no one was there, and then we walked around the gate and down to their gas pump. And after examining the pump for awhile and seeing that the nozzle was locked to it, we headed back to Eric's truck to get some tools.

He told me confidently that it would be no problem, that he had a plan in mind, a plan for dealing with the lock on the nozzle and maybe even the one on the gate, and I followed along willingly as he got out a screwdriver and then returned to go to work on the pump. He'd soon pulled out enough screws to free up the end of the nozzle, but at the same time he found that it was impossible to completely detach the nozzle from the pump. And for that reason, he was forced to begin thinking up a Plan B. In spite of the fact that we were both functioning in a drunken haze, we could clearly see that the only way we'd be able to get any of the gas into his truck would be by squirting it into some type of container and then pouring it from there into the gas tank. And it wasn't long after we'd reached that conclusion that Eric said he had just the thing and was gone.

He returned after a minute or two with a big metal ice-chest that had "Coca Cola" written on the side and said we were ready to begin. But just when we thought we'd overcome all obstacles, we found that we had a new problem in that the gas pump was turned off. We looked around for a switch but couldn't find one anywhere. The only thing we saw that looked anything like a switch was on a power-supply box on the side of the tool shed, but that switch was turned on so we knew that couldn't be it. I said that maybe the switch was inside the shed, and Eric agreed that we should check out the possibility, so he took his screwdriver and popped the pins out of the hinges on the door to the shed, and we went inside to look around for the switch. We looked everywhere, but the only switch we could find was the light switch, so we put the pins back into the hinges and resumed searching outside.

We stumbled around drunkenly and still found nothing on the outside of the shed and then decided to re-pop the hinge pins and take another look inside. But our new search was no more fruitful than our previous one had been, and the only switch we could find was still the light switch. As we discussed this fact, we decided in our fuzzy, drunken logic that the gas pump must be on the same circuit as the lights, so that what we should do now was to turn on the switch and see if the pump came on at the same time. But of course before we could do that, we'd have to unscrew all the light-bulbs so we wouldn't give ourselves away by turning on the lights. We went around and unscrewed the bulbs and then hit the switch, but surprise! There were a couple of bulbs we hadn't noticed, and the shed lit up in the middle of the dark night like a loudspeaker announcing our presence to the entire world. It took us several seconds to realize what had happened and turn the switch back off, our reactions were that slow, and then once we'd doused the lights, we hurried outside to be ready to run for it in case anyone had seen us.

No one showed up, though, so we continued on with our plan, unscrewing the last two light-bulbs and trying the switch once again and finding that it didn't turn on the pump after all. We were now out of ideas and, after replacing the bulbs and the hinge pins, we were about to give up and go away when I made one last check around the pump. Each of us had looked it over several times, but this time when I looked at it, I saw a little switch that I hadn't noticed before. I turned the switch on and—what do you know—the pump came roaring to life.

We held up the ice-chest and began squeezing the nozzle, squirting out a stream of gasoline which we did our best to direct toward the ice-chest. When the chest was around half full, Eric said that it was enough, it was all he could carry, so we shut off the pump and reattached the nozzle. And then Eric picked up the chest and began staggering toward his truck, his big muscles bulging under the weight of the load. He did pretty well considering how drunk he was and how much free-surface area the ice-chest had, as he spilled way less than a quarter of the gasoline onto the ground and onto his chest, arms and legs. He reached his truck and set the chest down for a rest, and at that point we realized that we still had one more problem to overcome as we didn't have a funnel of any type for pouring the gas into the truck's gas-tank. Old quick-thinking Eric soon came up with a solution, though, in the form of a big piece of paper which he folded into a funnel shape. And so with me holding the paper and Eric pouring, we proceeded to fill his gas-tank.

Of course, what with the way that the gasoline soaked through the paper so quickly, and with the way that Eric had such a hard time controlling the rate at which he poured the stuff out of the big, open ice-chest, there wasn't all that much of it that actually made it into the tank. It seemed like the biggest part of it spilled or leaked out of the funnel and dripped down my hands and down the side of the truck where it formed a big puddle beneath the truck.

But what the hell! At least it was free.

* * * * *

I was in Paul's room watching his TV one evening when suddenly the strangest thing happened. The characters in the TV turned and looked at me and began talking directly to me rather than to each other. And not only that, but they even began to step out of the TV screen and right into the room where I was sitting.

Oh no, I'm having a reflash!

I jumped up from the chair and dashed out of the room, but it didn't do me any good. The effects of the acid followed me as I went. I jogged down to the bathroom and splashed cold water onto my face, and then I looked at myself in the mirror. I looked into my dilated, spaced-out eyes and realized that I was helpless, that there was nothing I could do to stop the reflash from coming on full force. And to make matters worse, I could feel the panic coming back, the panic I'd felt the week before during that bad trip. I could feel it coming on, and I knew there was no escaping it. I knew that I was completely in its power and that it was going to keep coming on stronger and stronger until it had destroyed me. And I knew that there was nothing I could do now but go along for the ride—the ride to hell!

Words were coming toward me from far away, from deep within my consciousness, and as they approached I began to make them out. “One time too many!” The exact same words as the week before. The acid was telling me that I’d dropped one time too many and that there was nothing to do now but await my punishment, wait for it to drive me over the edge into permanent insanity or some other equally horrible fate. I’d managed to stop just short of the line the week before, just short of the point-of-no-return, because I’d promised never to drop acid again. But now here I was, stoned again and breaking my promise. Of course, I was doing it involuntarily—this was a reflash, not a trip—but that was only a technicality, and I knew it wouldn’t do me any good. I knew it wouldn’t be enough to save me.

Acid isn’t a toy. It isn’t something you can play around with like pot. It’s a very powerful mind-altering drug, one that can literally blow your mind. Why, I remember that time on an earlier trip when I said to myself, “Acid isn’t really all that heavy. I can still control my mind.” And no sooner had I said it than the acid answered me by spinning my head around in a complete circle. I actually saw the whole room spin by while my body remained motionless. And not only that, but once my head had spun around on my shoulders, I found that everything in the world had been completely reversed. Good had become bad. Pleasure had become pain. Black had become white. Up had become down. And at that point I’d been forced to concede that, no, I really couldn’t control my mind after all.

Acid is a tool, a mighty tool that can be used to unlock the possibilities of the mind and open it up to whole new levels of understanding. But while it can be used to demonstrate the existence of those new levels, it can’t actually take us up to those levels. It’s like that time in the woods when I was shown by the acid that I was searching for something, for some sort of ultimate, but then throughout the trip I was unable to actually find that something I sought. And it’s also like that other time when I dropped acid and then sat down to try to figure out Truth and the world and ultimate reality and all the rest of it. During that trip, I received all sorts of answers, each and every one of which seemed like The Answer for at least a brief moment before being supplanted by the next Answer. I went through christian explanations and quasi-hindu explanations in which the world is a manifestation of a divine consciousness; I went through materialist explanations in which the world is the result of pure evolutionary chance, and I went through idealist explanations in which only the mind exists and all the rest is pure illusion; and I even went through hallucinations in which I saw the world as consisting of nothing but spirals of consciousness, spirals that occasionally intersect through space and time. And then in a moment of great revelation, I finally saw the ultimate answer: the number four.

It was a very disheartening experience, one that left me disillusioned with the power of acid and even more disillusioned with the power of the mind. And the only conclusion I was able to draw afterwards was to say that philosophy is useless and that the deepest secrets of the world are unknowable to the intellect. We’re ignorant about ultimate reality and the meaning of life and all the rest, and we’ll always remain ignorant. There’s nothing we can do about it. All we can do is accept our ignorance and then go on functioning in the best way we can within that ignorance. All we can do is make the best of our pointless world and share it with each other and love each other. That’s it. That’s all we can do.

When I received that “revelation,” I knew it was the greatest truth I would ever be able to reach through acid, and I also knew that it marked the point at which I should have stopped

dropping. Because from there on out, the harmful effects of the acid on my mind would begin to outweigh the beneficial effects of its opening my eyes, of its breaking down my socially-conditioned mental patterns and allowing me to think for myself. And then last week I'd gone and dropped again, I'd dropped one more time—one time too many—and now I was paying for it. And not just once, either, but I was paying for it twice in a reflash that was beginning to repeat the living hell I'd experienced on my last trip.

Luckily though, the reflash didn't last nearly as long as a regular trip, and it wasn't long after that first rush of panic—and after my swearing once again to give up acid forever—that I began to come down. And so I'd been given a second reprieve. I'd been able to retain my sanity a second time. And this time it proved to be definitive as I was never foolish enough to risk my sanity a third time by ever dropping acid again.

FREE AT LAST

The day finally arrived when I got my degree from junior college, a useless two year degree in Pre-Engineering. And though my parents now tried to convince me to continue my studies, that was something I absolutely refused to consider. I'd already kept my promise to them. I'd already finished JC, and I wasn't about to make any new promises. I was finished with school—forever—and I was a free man, free to go where I wanted and do what I wanted, though not exactly free to get a ship whenever I wanted since the Vietnam slowdown was now in full swing.

When I'd graduated from high school almost three years earlier, the buildup had still been going strong, and there'd been work for anyone who wanted it down at the union hall. But now three years later, the stockpiles were already built up and Nixon was Vietnamizing the war, and ships were being scrapped left and right. The merchant fleet was shrinking at a much faster rate than the old-timers who had gone back to sea during the buildup were re-retiring, so the situation around the union hall was exactly the opposite of what it had been before. There were too many seamen and not enough ships, and it was almost impossible for a guy like me with so little seniority to get any kind of work at all.

And one other problem I would have to deal with now would be the problem of the draft since leaving school meant losing my student deferment, a deferment which I'd managed to maintain during the last few years despite the several breaks I'd taken from school in order to go to sea. But now that draft-dodge was lost and gone forever, and I was draft-bait, prime draft-bait with a lottery number well within the draftable range. So I'd have to deal with the draft in one way or another. I'd have to make a decision to apply for conscientious objector or to resist the draft or to simply ignore them and hope I could somehow slip between the cracks. But whatever my decision was going to be, there was no way I was going to serve in their comic army or their stupid war. And I wouldn't fake a physical condition to stay out—I was in perfect health and always had been—and I wouldn't run away to Canada, either. I wouldn't let some military assholes run me out of my own country. I'd stay around and face the situation head on, and I'd let the cards fall where they may.

That was a problem for the future, though, something I would deal with when the time came. And the employment situation was something that could wait awhile, too, since I still had

a little money saved up. What I wanted to do right now was to live, to explore the possibilities of life and freedom that were stretching out before me. I wasn't interested in looking for work, I was interested in looking for life and in living it. I was interested in seeing and doing new things, in making new and exciting scenes for that life-movie that was constantly being projected before my eyes.

I'd become aware of the movie while on acid, become aware of the fact that my life was just like a movie with my eyes serving as cameras. And once I'd realized it, I'd vowed to make my personal movie as interesting as it could possibly be. I'd vowed that it should be packed full of exotic settings and interesting characters, full of action and excitement, full of adventure and romance and surprise twists. Or in other words, I'd vowed that my life should be as far removed from the mediocrity of Middle-Class America as I could possibly make it.

I wanted action, I wanted adventure, I wanted Experience! That's what I wanted: Experience! I wanted to experience everything. I wanted to see and do everything, and it really didn't matter to me whether the experience was a pleasant one or not as long as it was an experience. Because good and bad, pleasant and unpleasant, are nothing more than interpretations that we make about our experiences. They're not real in themselves, and for that matter neither is adventure or romance or any of the rest of it. All those things are interpretations of experience and nothing more, while the only reality is the experience itself.

And that's what I wanted, the Experience! I wanted to experience it all. I wanted both the normal, everyday experiences that we call life and also the totality of experience, the experience of total existence that can only be called "It." I wanted the total experience that I'd glimpsed while on acid but been unable to really enter into. And in addition to "It," I also wanted to experience peace of mind and happiness, though I felt that there was no particular hurry in arriving at that point. I was way too restless right then for peace of mind, and the only thing that could be done was to let the restlessness run its course. I had a great urge to live life, to live it truly and deeply, and I didn't want to let happiness stand in the way of my doing so. Besides, happiness seemed like it could get awfully boring if it lasted too long.

And boredom was the one thing I wanted to avoid. It was the one thing that scared me the most. It was the one thing that could truly depress me, and so I vowed to avoid it at all costs. And if that meant foregoing paradise and immersing myself in unpleasantness and suffering, then so be it. Because suffering is a part of life, and I wanted to experience it right along with the rest. I wanted to suffer if that meant being more truly alive, if that meant being more intimately acquainted with every aspect of Experience!

I remember how once at a party I'd gotten to talking with a black girl and she'd asked me my opinion about hunger, about where exactly it was that you felt true hunger, whether it was in the stomach or in the mouth, and I'd been forced to admit that I had no idea. I'd never gone without a meal and knew nothing at all about hunger. I'd lived a protected, insulated existence and knew almost nothing about suffering. I'd missed out on all that very large part of life that we call suffering.

But now I was a free man. Now I was free to seek out adventure and happiness and unhappiness and suffering. I was free to seek out life in all its forms. I was free to seek out Experience!

ON THE ROAD

“How much marijuana do you smoke, light, medium or heavy quantity?” the Canadian border guard asked me.

The question took me by surprise, and in answer I was only able to mumble out, “None, none at all,” in a very unconvincing way. My answer was unconvincing because I’d been caught so far off guard by the question, and it was also unconvincing because of the way I’d suddenly become so highly aware of the lid I had hidden in my sock. It’s hard to deny that you smoke when you know you’re holding, and it’s especially hard to do so when you’re brand new to the road like I was.

I mean, it had only been a matter of hours since I’d left Eric at Paul’s new place in Seattle and gotten onto a bus for Vancouver, executing the first leg of a plan to avoid Washington’s anti-hitchhiking laws during my return trip to California by taking the scenic route through Canada. The plan was to hitch east from Vancouver until I could cut south through Idaho and then make my way to California from there. But in laying out this fantastic plan, I hadn’t counted on having any sort of problems with the Canadian border guards, and now I was beginning to regret that oversight. This guard had been giving me a hard time right from the moment he’d seen my ticket, which was one-way, and in spite of the fact that I’d assured him several times that I wasn’t a draft dodger, he didn’t seem to believe a word I said. And now upon hearing my unconvincing answer to his question about drugs, he gave me his final verdict. “You can’t enter Canada.”

“I what??” His decision took me completely by surprise, and I was still in shock as I got into the cab and rode back to the bus station in Blaine. I got out of the cab and stood around for awhile surveying my predicament. Because here I was stuck in Blaine, unable to go north and unable to hitchhike south without risking arrest and unwilling to buy a bus ticket to Oregon. Here I was with no idea of what to do next.

I stood around for awhile, then strapped my pack onto my back and began wandering down the road in the direction away from Canada. I walked along aimlessly for some time, trying to decide upon a course of action, until a car pulled up alongside me. The woman driver asked me where I was going. “I was going to Canada, but they won’t let me in,” I answered, and she told me to get in. She said she could help me. She drove for several miles out of town and into the woods along dirt roads and finally came to a stop where a jeep trail branched off to the north. “Just follow this trail,” she said, “and when you come to a big meadow, that’s Canada.”

I thanked her and began walking up the trail, and I’d followed it for about a mile when I came to a fence that blocked my way. The fence was an old one, made of wood and barbed wire, and it was very haphazardly constructed, having obviously been knocked down and rebuilt a great number of times, so that it was no problem to simply step over it. I continued along the trail for a short distance more until I came to a place where the forest ended and farmland stretched

out before me. And upon seeing it, I felt a twinge of victory in my breast—victory and vengeance—because here I was in Canada after all. I’d made it in spite of that asshole at the border.

I met a farm kid not long afterward, and he gave me a place to sleep that night before putting me on a bus for Vancouver the next day. And as soon as I arrived in Vancouver, I went up to the first freek I found and asked him if he knew of a place where I could crash. He directed me toward Kool-Aid House which, as luck would have it, was clear over on the other side of town, so I began to walk. And then after walking for blocks and blocks, after walking for what seemed like miles, when I knew I must be getting close to the place, I came across a couple of street-kids and decided to ask them for directions. They were only about thirteen or fourteen years old, with long blonde hair and dirty clothes, and they had the look of people who had been living on the street for a long time. They knew where Kool-Aid House was, of course, and not only did they give me directions, but they even offered to take me there since that was where they were planning on crashing that night, too.

The three of us went in and sat down on the floor of what had once been a living room, and at the street-kids’ suggestion, I rolled up a joint and the three of us passed it around. We were about halfway through the joint when suddenly some big, husky long-hair—the guy who ran Kool-Aid House, as it turned out—came up behind the two street-kids and grabbed them by the hair and threw them toward the door, yelling at them and at me to get the hell out, that drugs were prohibited in the house. The kids kept cussing at the guy as the three of us walked down the street, saying that he was a goddamn speed-freak and a fuckin’ hypocrite for not letting us smoke when he was doing all sorts of drugs himself.

Once the kids had calmed down a little, I asked them if they knew where we could crash now that we couldn’t go back to Kool-Aid, and they said not to worry. There was another place not far away. It wasn’t long before we got there, and when we did, what a place it turned out to be. It was a great big old wooden house that had been completely painted over in psychedelic colors and designs and even had “LSD” painted on the front door in giant psychedelic letters. I saw that house and that door, and right away I said to myself: This is it. This is the real thing. This is the counter-culture. This isn’t just going to the Fillmore or Altamont, and it definitely isn’t just a bunch of guys getting stoned and sitting around the house. This is the revolution!

And then when I saw the inside of the place, I wasn’t disappointed at all. Some of the walls were painted in the same psychedelic designs as the outside, and the sparse furnishings were the height of hippie fashion: old sofas and easy chairs, a couple of them draped with South Asian-patterned pieces of cloth, a big wooden wire-rope spool that served as a table, and other similar adornments. The kids knew right where to go in the house, and they led me up a couple flights of stairs, then down to the end of a hall and out a window to a ladder running up the outside of the house, and finally up the ladder to a room that stood perched by itself high above the rest of the house. This room was where the guy who ran the place lived and, finding that he was at home, the three of us went in and asked if it would be okay to crash there that night.

He was an average hippie-looking guy with long brown hair and ragged blue jeans, but he had about him an air of innate authority and leadership that reminded me a lot of Eric. He began by telling us that the policy of letting anyone and everyone crash at the house had recently been

ended due to the thefts and all the other problems it had created. But then he went on to say that he'd let the three of us stay there that night since he already knew the kids and since he'd apparently decided that I was okay. We sealed the pact by smoking a joint out of my lid—good California weed, the kids kept saying, a lot better than the stuff you got up here—and then the three of us climbed back down the ladder and down the stairs and down another flight of stairs, all the way to the basement where we'd be spending the night.

The main part of the basement was a big open area that looked like a dance floor, though it had no sound system or instruments or anything else for making music. It seemed that everything they used to have had been stolen by people crashing there. The back wall was lined with broken-down sofas and chairs, and there were more sofas in the two or three smaller rooms that branched off from the main one. Near the back of the main room there was a trap door which the street-kids pointed out to me, saying that it was our escape hatch in case of a raid, because what with the house being built on the side of a hill, the basement was partially above ground, sitting up on stilts in the back. So if the police ever came, all we had to do was to jump out the trap door and run down the hill.

The kids and I sat down in a corner of the main room and ate some of the fruit and munchies I had in my pack, after which we just hung around until they finally got bored and decided to head toward the street. They didn't invite me to come along with them, so I stayed in my corner watching the parade of freeks and street-people and other assorted misfits who were constantly coming and going there in that basement. I didn't know what to do with myself in that type of society besides sit and watch and speak when spoken to. I was new to all this, and I felt pretty far out of place. But the one thing I had going for me was the fact that I was stoned when I walked in, and as I sat there and soaked up that strange atmosphere, the high just seemed to go on and on. I still felt stoned when the street-kids came back, and I felt stoned when they left again a short time later. And in fact, the contact high was only just beginning to wear off when the trouble began that evening.

I heard loud voices coming from the vicinity of the front door, and I followed the rest of the people from the basement upstairs to find that the house had been invaded by a whole gang of hardass-looking guys. As I learned the story later, it seemed that the day before, the leader of this gang had strong-armed one of the guys from the house into giving him a hit of acid. And now he was coming back to complain that the acid hadn't been any good and that he wanted his money back. Someone tried to tell him that the reason he hadn't gotten off had been because he'd been too drunk at the time he'd dropped, but this argument had no more effect on him than the argument that he hadn't actually paid anything for it in the first place would have had. He didn't care what anyone said. He wanted his money back.

It wasn't long before the leader of the house appeared in the kitchen and confronted the leader of the gang. The gang-leader said a few words and then charged, at which point the house-leader smashed an empty wine jug over the guy's head, and then the two of them fell down and wrestled around on the kitchen floor among the broken glass. Being convinced that a general brawl was about to break out, I looked over at the big, mean-looking black guy from the gang who was standing next to me and began edging away toward the basement steps. This wasn't my fight. I'd only been in the house for a few hours, and I sure didn't want to take on anyone as big and tough as this guy in its defense. But my cowardice wasn't really necessary in the end as

people soon pulled the two leaders apart, after which the guys from the gang left, their leader swearing loudly that he'd be back to finish what he'd started.

The house-leader shrugged the whole thing off, saying that it had been a long time since he'd been in a fight and that it was good to remind yourself what one feels like from time to time. But while he was cool and calm, some of the other people were pretty shaken up by the whole thing. One girl who lived in the house was nearly hysterical with fear, and there was this nerdy-looking kid from a neighboring house who kept strutting around swearing that he'd go get his gun and kill those bastards if they ever dared to come back. As it turned out, though, they didn't reappear that night, which saved the kid from having to blow anyone away. They didn't come back and nothing else happened. And after a bunch of us had sat around talking for a couple of hours—after we'd sat in a circle on the living room floor with a candle burning in the center of the circle—we finally decided that we may as well all go to bed.

There were no more incidents and no more surprises that night, and it wasn't until the next morning that I awoke to the biggest surprise yet, to the surprise of finding that I'd been robbed during the night. I was new to the road, and I'd made what's just about the biggest mistake you can make. I'd failed to put my money in a safe enough place when I'd gone to bed. I'd left it in my pants, and I'd used the pants as a part of my pillow. But someone had managed to come by and get his hand into that pocket while I was asleep, so that when I got up in the morning and put on the pants, I found that there was only one dollar left. Whoever had robbed me had been generous enough to leave me that much.

Everyone was still asleep in the basement and things were quiet all over the house as I stood and thought about what to do. I thought about raising a stink, but I knew that I'd never be able to prove anything or to find out who had taken it, which would make it a complete waste of time for me to do so. The money was gone and all I had to show for it was the fact that I'd learned a lesson about life on the road. I'd learned a very important but very expensive lesson. And so in the end, I didn't say anything to anyone. I just quietly got dressed and grabbed my pack and headed out.

I was angry about losing the money, and I was a bit nervous about being broke and so far from home. But as soon as I stepped out of the house and saw what a beautiful morning it was—the beginning of a bright, sunny day—I told myself that I shouldn't let the lost money stand in the way of my enjoying this day. It's just not worth it. Happiness is worth so much more than money.

It wasn't long before I was smiling and whistling and enjoying the morning, and it wasn't long before I'd decided to go ahead and continue with my plan of hitchhiking east. I just wouldn't worry about it. I'd start hitching and let things work themselves out however they worked themselves out. What the hell. I was young and free and hungry for Experience!

(Fragment)

One evening after a fruitless day at the union hall, I came back to the big, old-fashioned boarding house where I was living to find that the Indians had just gotten their government checks for the month and that the whole place had turned into one giant party. I ran into a couple

of Apache guys I knew and, wanting to do my part for the party, I invited them to come down to my room and smoke some dope.

We went down to the basement room that I shared with two other white guys, one of whom happened to be at home at the time. Now my roommate Keith was a guy who'd recently gotten out of San Quentin after spending five years there for robbery and who, partly because of the fact that he was so young when he first went in and partly because of the fact that he was gay to begin with, had gone the punk route in prison. He'd been the "woman" in prison, and even though he was free now, he still had a tendency to act out that role. His prison punk personality didn't sit too well with certain people and, as luck would have it, one of the Apaches I'd invited in for a smoke was one of the very people who despised him the most.

We had just sat down on one of the beds and I'd begun rolling up a joint when the Apache got up and went over to Keith and began calling him a faggot and a wimp and any other name that came into his boozed-out brain. Keith looked over at me for help, and I responded by lighting the joint and handing it to the Apache just as he'd begun slapping Keith. He took a hit from the joint and it seemed to calm him down and make him forget about his anger as he came back over and sat down on the bed. We sat there and smoked the joint and shot the shit for awhile, but then the second Apache, evidently getting bored with the lack of action, decided to liven things up by stirring up his partner. And he started saying, "Look at that little faggot sitting over there. Go kick his ass."

The first Apache took the bait and went after Keith for a second time, calling him all sorts of names and slapping him several times. He called Keith every name he could think of, constantly reaching for greater and greater insults until he finally dug deep and came up with the worst insult of them all: "You fuckin' whiteman!" But no sooner had he said it than he turned to me and said, "Hey, man, no offense."

Keith looked at me for help again as the Apache slapped him harder and harder and even began to kick him, and I responded in the only way I knew how. I rolled and lit another joint and handed it to the Apache. He took a hit and sat back down, and everything was fine for awhile until the second Apache started egging him on once again. And at that point, the whole scene repeated itself nearly word for word, including the whiteman insult to Keith and the apology to me. I was forced to light still another joint to stop this latest assault, and this time Keith finally had sense enough to get out during the lull and go hide in another room until after the Apaches had left.

GRINGOS FEOS

Not long after we'd finished unloading the tuna at the cannery and then tied up at a layup dock, Eric and Marty came by the ship to pick me up. They were both in town because of the tuna boats—Marty had already made a trip on one, and Eric was looking for work—but at the time, the only thing they had on their minds was partying. Serious partying. Eric was one of the heaviest partiers I've ever met, which is really saying something considering the number of seamen I've known over the years, and Marty was one of the few guys I've ever met who would even consider matching him drink for drink and drug for drug. So given the way that those two wild men were wound up and ready to go, I could see right away that we were in for a wild day.

We polished off a fifth of gin before we even got into Marty's VW and headed for Ensenada, and then we stopped in Tijuana to buy beer for the drive south. As we were just coming into Ensenada, we gave a ride to a group of Mexican girls, cramming them into Marty's little VW and drinking beer together and then throwing the bottles out the window as we cruised around town. But when we found that they didn't understand much English and that they didn't want to "fucky, fucky," we soon said goodbye and dropped them off. We spent what was left of the afternoon wandering around town with beers in our hands, and then come evening we headed for Hussong's where we planned on getting down to some serious partying.

Marty and I were buying beers—Eric didn't have any money—and we even bought a few shots of tequila which Eric and Marty threw down as fast as they got them. It soon became apparent that I was way out of my league, so I made no attempt to keep up with the two of them as they chugged beers and threw down shots, and as they staggered around the bar yelling and dancing and bumping into people and things and punching each other like the pair of rowdy drunks that they were. Some time later that evening, after the place had filled up with young gringos, Eric jumped up and sat right on the bar. And while he was there, he began stealing shots, picking up one or two and throwing them down each time the bartender poured a group of them. At one point, Eric leaned over and vomited on the floor, but no sooner had he finished vomiting than he chugged down the beer he had in his hand just like it was a chaser, and he went right on stealing shots.

As you can well imagine, our behavior didn't go completely unnoticed by the bartender or by the law, and it wasn't too much longer before a group of police came in to break up our little party. I happened to be over at the other end of the bar when they came in, and Eric was in the bathroom, so the only one of us they got was Marty who they dragged outside to the paddy wagon. I saw them go by off in the distance and made my way outside in time to see five or six of them trying to force Marty into the wagon and him fighting them off for all he was worth. The cops pushed and shoved and hit him a few times, but still he wouldn't go in. He was too strong for them, for all of them together, and it was only after an extended struggle that they finally managed to get him inside. I wasn't drunk enough to try to help him by joining in on the struggle—no use both of us getting busted—but I did what I could by going up to the head cop and offering him money to let Marty go, a bribe which he refused to accept.

Once Marty was inside the paddy wagon and ready to go, I felt the anger and frustration boiling up into my drunken brain, and I soon vented my rage on the head cop. He didn't seem to appreciate my comments about him and his sexual tendencies and his relationship with his mother and his birth and all the rest of it, and he responded by pulling out his gun and starting to come after me. I was too drunk and too angry to feel any fear when I saw the gun, but I still had enough sense to know that I should get the hell out of there right away. So I dashed out into traffic and then ducked around a corner before he had a chance to get off a shot.

I wandered around the streets for a few minutes until I figured it was safe to go back to the bar, and once I got there I looked all over for Eric but couldn't find him anywhere. After I'd looked everywhere I could think of with no success, I decided to go look for Marty and then come back for Eric later on. I asked around for the location of the jail and then followed the directions to a neighborhood lockup, but when I got there I found that they'd never heard of

Marty. They told me about another lockup not far away, and I went there only to find that they weren't holding Marty there, either.

I went back and forth between the two lockups several times, stopping off at Hussong's each time to look for Eric, but I had no luck at all. Both of my partners were gone. My anger and frustration kept growing and growing as time went on, and it didn't help a bit when, on one of my visits to the second lockup, I saw a whole group of pigs beat the shit out of a young gringo guy. He and his girlfriend had gotten busted, and when she got hysterical as they were being led off in different directions, he went over to try to comfort her. And it was at that point that the pigs started swinging. They knocked him to the ground and then stood around kicking him while he lay there groaning. And then when he didn't get up when they told him to—he was too badly hurt to get up—they started kicking him again. I was so mad when I saw that scene that I was tempted to rush in and grab the gun from one of the pigs with his back to me. I wanted to do it, I really wanted to, but I wasn't quite crazy enough with anger at that moment to actually perform such a suicidal stunt. Instead all I did was rant and rave and cuss and stomp around and grow even more frustrated than I'd already been.

I finally found Marty by complete accident, found him standing along a street talking to a couple of Mexican guys about helping him try to find his friends. I immediately took charge of the situation and led Marty to his car while he told me about how he'd been taken to some jail across town and how they'd let him go after he'd paid them ten dollars. We got to the car, and I told Marty to get in and wait for me while I tried to find Eric. And with that I went back to Hussong's and the surrounding area to look for him one last time, but as thorough as I was in my search, I couldn't find a single sign of him anywhere. So I finally gave up and went back to Marty's car. But when I got there, I found that Marty was still standing in the street and that a local cop was standing beside him holding the keys.

I went up to the cop and asked him what was wrong, and he pointed to Marty and said that he was too drunk to drive. I responded by saying, "But he's not driving. I'm driving, and I'm not drunk." At this point the cop's English seemed to fail him, and the only reply he made to my statement was, "No entiendo." I tried everything I could think of to explain to him that I was the driver, but he refused to understand either my English or my high school Spanish or my sign language. And as I found myself running out of arguments, I finally pointed to Marty and said, "Look, he's okay. He's not very drunk." But Marty, who had been leaning against the car all this time, picked that very moment to slip and fall flat on his ass in the street. I saw him fall, and I turned away with a groan of surrender, and then seeing that there was no other solution, I reached into my pocket and pulled out a five dollar bill and gave it to the cop who promptly handed me the keys.

I drove out of town to a place where Marty and I could sleep in the car, and then in the morning we drove back into town to look for Eric. Marty said that the last he'd seen of him, he'd been running along behind the paddy wagon yelling, "I'll come and get you, Marty." But that fact didn't provide us with much of a clue as to his present whereabouts. We looked all morning, looked in jails and hospitals and everywhere else we could think of, but we just couldn't find him. And finally we said that, well, Eric knows how to take care of himself, and so the two of us drove back to the USA without him.

We got to Marty's place in Long Beach and there, to our surprise, we found Eric. He told us that he didn't know what happened that night. All he knew was that when he woke up the next morning, he was in the back seat of a car in a used car lot, having smashed in a window to get into the car the night before. He was very hung-over, and he'd lost his shirt, and he had scratches all over his chest and arms like he'd been walking through bushes. And on top of that, he was stuck somewhere in the middle of Mexico with no money. He cursed his fate as he got out of the car and began walking down the street, wondering where exactly he was, until he turned the first corner and saw a big sign that said U. S. Border. So he was in Tijuana! Somehow he'd gotten from Ensenada to Tijuana the night before, but he had no idea of how he'd done it.

Marty and I each told our stories, too, and the three of us laughed and agreed that it had been one hell of an Experience! even though we didn't remember all that much of it.

(Fragments)

I didn't make another trip on the tuna boat. I got fired for being two days late getting back from vacation, something that couldn't be helped since I was in jail for possession at the time—charges dropped. I hung around California, but I was getting bored with the place and wanted to expand my horizons. And so I decided to head east, to go see what that strange and mysterious land called "Back East" was all about.

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The driver and I lapsed into silence now that we'd each told our stories, and I sat back to watch the scenery. I wasn't particularly impressed by the desert—I missed the green of the forest—but still there was something to be said for the ongoing panorama that the lack of obstructions allowed. I could look out ahead and see hills far off in the distance, and then a half hour or an hour later, I would know that we were passing over the very same hills that I'd seen earlier. Climbing up and arriving at the crest to see still another set of hills far off in the distance. It was almost hypnotic to watch the car advance across the wide-open landscape. It made me feel like I was floating, like I was riding on a magic carpet that floated along a few feet above the ground. I loved the sensation, and I told myself that if the whole trip was going to be like this, it would be a great three thousand miles.

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In DC, I joined an anti-war demonstration and got busted along with several hundred other people, a voluntary bust that seemed so completely pointless to me that I swore I'd never go to jail voluntarily again. Then in New York my money gave out. I hadn't really thought about finances when I'd started out, and now when I went into a bank to try to get some of my money from California, I was told that I'd have to wait about two weeks for the money to arrive since all I had was a savings account out there, no checks and no credit cards. Since I preferred going without food to going without a place to sleep, I paid a couple weeks' rent in a flea-bag hotel with the money I had left, giving me a place to live while I waited for the money to arrive. Because of that decision, though, I spent some very hungry days in New York. I refused to panhandle, so during the first week or so, about the only thing I ate was an occasional meal that some gay guy who was trying to pick up on me provided me with. But he soon got tired of

feeding me without any reciprocation on my part and demanded that I have sex with him. So I tried it—I'd try anything once in those days—but I just couldn't get into it at all. I was way too hetero and way too honest about it to ever play the gay hustler role. And after that sexual misfire, he stopped seeing me and stopped feeding me, so that I found myself going without food once again until my money finally arrived. And then as soon as it came, I split.

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The first thing these guys asked me when they picked me up in Virginia was whether or not I had any dope. And when I answered in the negative, I saw a look of disappointment come into their faces. We talked and joked and told stories, making the best of our dopeless situation as we drove south until, somewhere in North Carolina, we saw a car full of longhairs going our direction, a car full of longhairs who were passing around a joint.

The driver pulled up alongside the other car, and the guy in the passenger seat made a sign asking for a hit. The guys in the other car smiled and waved and, after a little while, one of them pulled out a freshly rolled joint and held it up, offering it to us. We smiled and nodded to show our acceptance of the offer, and soon there were people leaning out the windows of each car and passing the joint over.

We yelled out thank you and flashed peace signs, and they did the same, and then we lit up the joint and passed it around. And man, it was some damn good stuff.

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I wasn't too far north of Miami when I got a ride from a middle-aged guy who told me that he was a Seventh Day Adventist missionary just back from South America and on his way to Tennessee. Now, this didn't exactly sound promising since rides from religious fanatics who want to convert you are one of the very worst types of rides you can get. So I was expecting this to be one of those rides where you just grit your teeth and take it until you reach your destination, which in this case was Jacksonville where we'd be crossing I-10 West. But as it turned out, the guy was pleasant and low-key in his preaching, and we got along pretty well. And then when he picked up another hitchhiker a number of miles farther up the road, the ride turned out to be downright enjoyable, maybe even memorable.

The other hitchhiker wasn't exactly your typical guy-on-the-road. He was too well dressed and was carrying a suitcase instead of a sea-bag like me, and his story was far from your typical road-story. He told us that he'd just been trying to start a business in Florida but that it had gone belly up, and that he was now on his way north to try again somewhere else, hitching his way there to save what little money he still had left. He was honest and outspoken, and he didn't hesitate a bit in cutting off the missionary when the guy started preaching at him.

The missionary wasn't upset, though. He was way too nice of a guy and too reasonable to get angry when his religious beliefs were challenged, and instead he answered back with calm, thoughtful arguments supporting his views. The two of them were soon caught up in a friendly but far-reaching debate, a debate which I also joined and which wandered all over the place until it had covered just about every religious and moral and political and social question that any of us could think of. I don't remember any details of the debate, don't know who said what exactly

to whom, but I remember that it was one of the most stimulating conversations I've ever had. The three of us had very divergent points of view—a missionary, a capitalist and a would-be hippie—and while we each defended our positions as staunchly as we could, we all liked each other way too much to engage in gratuitous or unreasonable attacks on anyone else's positions.

The ride was so pleasant that I decided not to get out when we crossed I-10, but to ride clear to Chattanooga instead. What the hell, there's no use giving up a good, long ride just because it didn't take me along some predetermined route to California. I had quite a bit of experience on the road by now, and I knew I'd be able to work my way west from Chattanooga just as easily as I could along I-10. It might take me a bit longer to get there, but then I was in no big hurry to get back. I may as well just take my time and enjoy the trip and go wherever the rides may take me.

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I got dropped off in Nashville right where the freeways split and, after looking around but not finding any better spot to hitch nearby, I decided to stand right where I was and put out my thumb. I hadn't been there long when a fat cop pulled over and stopped just in front of me and gave me a hard look. I went over to him and was about to say hello in the sort of half-friendly, half-cautious tone I always used when being roused by the police, but before I could say a thing to him, he growled out, "Git yer ass off the Interstate!" I didn't know quite how to answer this greeting of his and stood there for a second or two with a dumb, surprised look on my face before recovering enough to give him a big smile. And with that, I turned and walked away without ever having said a word.

I began walking down the freeway while he stayed where he was and watched me go, and I hadn't gone far before a car pulled over to pick me up. It was a big old boat of a car with a rusted out body and an engine that made all sorts of strange noises, and the driver was this wild, crazy, don't-give-a-hell cowboy. I got in and the guy took off like a shot, pushing the old wreck for all it was worth. He was shooting along at around a hundred, weaving past the other cars on the freeway as I held on for dear life. But then suddenly, after we'd gone less than ten miles down the road, we heard the sound of an explosion that came from somewhere inside the engine, and then we heard nothing but silence.

He managed to pull over before the car had lost momentum, and then he got out and opened the hood. He took out the battery and put it under his arm saying that it was the only thing in the whole car worth saving, and then as he started walking and hitchhiking down the road, he said goodbye and wished me luck.

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Each time a car went by, my anger and frustration increased. I had been stuck in this spot for hours now, and I was way overdue for a ride. But there seemed to be no way of convincing the people in the cars passing by that it was high time one of them stopped. All I could do was stand there with my thumb out and hope that eventually someone would take pity on me. I'd thought about starting to walk, but the only thing ahead was miles and miles of desert followed by some two-bit town that was probably no better than the one where I was already standing. No,

the only thing I could do was to wait. Just wait for a ride that I knew had to come along eventually.

I could go get on a bus and ride for awhile, maybe all the way to the next state, but somehow that seemed like cheating. I was a road-freek, a hardcore road-freek, and I got to wherever I was going by hitchhiking, not by paying fares. If I gave up and took a bus now, I'd be just another middle-class pantywaist who quits as soon as things get a little bit tough. I wouldn't be a road-freek. So I had to stick it out no matter how long it took.

I looked at all the smug, self-absorbed people shooting by in their comfortable cars, and I hated their guts. Sometimes when a car got close enough to where it was obvious that the guy wasn't going to stop, I'd pull in my thumb and stick out my middle finger, flipping off the cold-hearted asshole. I hated the ones who looked at me like I was a signpost and kept right on going, and I hated the ones who laughed at me when they saw how miserable I was. And I also hated the ones who ignored me altogether, just keeping their eyes on the road as though I weren't even there. The only ones I didn't hate were the occasional kids who would flash me the peace sign as they went by. But though I didn't hate them, I hated their parents who wouldn't stop and give me a ride.

Having to stand by the side of the road and beg for a ride from this bunch of assholes wasn't a bit good for my ego, and as I got more and more frustrated with my situation, I thought up bigger and bigger insults for the people driving by. And at the same time as I cursed them and flipped them off, I also took out my frustrations on myself by thinking lovingly about my death. I thought about how great it would be to be dead right now, how great it was to know that I probably wouldn't last much longer with the risks I was always taking. And I thought about how comforting it was to know that I'd probably be dead sometime in the near future. I thought about death and I longed for it, though not quite hard enough to actually go out and throw myself in front of one of the cars. No, I would just let death come to me when it came, that was all, and in the meantime, the only thing I would do was to look forward to it.

I would just look forward to death and keep on hitching, keep on trying to get a ride since that was the only way I'd ever be able to get out of this fuckin' shit-hole town where I was stuck.

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Back in California, I didn't settle down in any one spot, but instead I spent my time hitchhiking all over the state, visiting friends for a few days at a time before getting back out on the road. I was getting pretty tired of the hassles and discomforts of life on the road—of the long waits and the long walks and the cold and the rain and all the rest—but the boredom of staying in any one place for more than a few days or a week at a time bothered me even more. And so I was constantly fleeing the boredom by returning to the road and going somewhere else. Anywhere else!

Another thing that was starting to bore me was always having to repeat the same old story of my life to everyone who gave me a ride. And for that reason I now started improvising and creating new life-stories for each ride I got. Sometimes I was a college student out on a lark, and sometimes I was a farm-boy out seeing the country. Sometimes I was a veteran just back from

Vietnam, and sometimes I was a deserter. And the more different stories I made up, the more I enjoyed doing it and the more liberated I felt.

That's right, liberated. I felt like I was becoming liberated from the tyranny of the past, the tyranny of carrying around a personal history and of constantly having to live up to that history. The tyranny of constantly having to repeat the patterns of behavior that were contained within that history. Because by becoming a whole new person during each and every ride, I found that I had a whole new set of expectations to live up to with each and every driver, expectations that I could either live up to or ignore since they were phony expectations based on a phony version of my past. In short, I found that I could do whatever I wanted to do, that I could be whoever I wanted to be. I found that by losing my past, I could become truly free in the present.

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I got a ride from a family in a beat-up old station wagon. I sat in the second seat with the father while the mother and oldest daughter sat in front and the young kids were in the back. The mother was a big, heavysset woman, and the daughter next to her was well on her way to becoming just as fat, while the father had the unmistakable look of a long-time alcoholic. He was a happy drunk, though, and he offered me a beer as soon as I sat down beside him. They explained to me that they weren't going very far, just to the next town where they'd be looking for a job as cook for the father, and that they would only be continuing on if they had no luck.

Now, the guy was in no shape for a job interview. He was already so drunk that he'd probably have trouble standing, and this in spite of the fact that it was still before noon. So it was a good thing that when we pulled into the first desert town, it was the mother who walked into the local diner to ask if there was an opening. She soon came back to the car and said nothin' doin', and we continued on to the next town. The scene was repeated in several more towns, and the only change that took place was that the father got drunker and drunker, with a bigger and bigger smile on his face. That and the fact that we got a little ways further down the road toward Texas. Finally when we got to a bigger town where there were a number of restaurants, the mother said they'd be staying there for a day or two, and she dropped me off along the highway. And as they drove away, I wished them all the best of luck in their job search.

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I was standing by the road with my thumb out, like always, when a carload of cowboys came speeding by. They yelled some type of insults at me, and then as they passed, I heard a crash just beside me and looked down to see the smashed remains of a beer bottle scattered along the road a few feet away. I turned and looked at the car speeding away behind me, and then I yelled out at the top of my lungs, "You missed me, you assholes!"

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While our survey boat was in the shipyard in Port Arthur, a group of us went out to a local bar to have a few drinks. We sat back in a corner and minded our own business, and after awhile a couple of the guys left to see if they could score some dope while the other three of us stayed behind and waited. We'd been sitting there inoffensively for some time when a drunken

redneck came staggering up to us and looked Arthur in the face—Arthur who was black—and told him, “We don’t like your kind around here. You better get out.”

Before Arthur could say or do a thing, I spoke up and answered the guy by saying that we liked it just fine where we were and didn’t feel like leaving. I don’t know if I spoke up because I felt like the leader, being the old salt of the group, or if I just did it because I was a fool with a big mouth. But whatever the case may be, the result was that the guy immediately turned away from Arthur and focused all his wrath on me.

I’d been reading quite a bit of stuff recently about pacifism and passive resistance, and I sincerely believed at the time that I was a pacifist. I was convinced that it was possible to avoid violence by talking to people in the right way, and that was what I now endeavored to do. Of course, my opening line hadn’t been very pacific, but still I thought I could bring this guy around if I just played it right.

I was wrong, though. The guy wanted to fight someone and that was that. There was no way he was going to change his mind. I tried everything I could think of, but his hostility toward me never waned, and that unwavering bad attitude of his began to get on my nerves after awhile. I never felt any fear, though, and I didn’t feel anger. I just felt as though I had a damned pesky mosquito buzzing around my head in the dark and that all I wanted was for the pest to go away. But he wouldn’t go. He just kept standing there challenging me until I finally ran out of things to say. And at that point I tried to end the conversation by looking him in the eye and saying, “I’m not gonna fight you, man, no way am I gonna fight you,” and then turning away.

I’d just turned when he hit me along the side of my head and knocked me off my chair. I didn’t hit him back, though. I just covered up as he flailed away ineffectually until someone finally pulled him off me. His punches hadn’t hurt a bit—he was too drunk to hit very hard—and in addition to not being hurt, I was also completely without fear or anger. Instead, all I felt was a deep inner calm. I got up and set the chair back up and was about to sit down again when the bartender came over yelling for the two of us to get out. And foolishly I began to obey his order.

I had started toward the door, the redneck hanging onto me as I went, when I began to realize that I was getting myself into a seriously dangerous situation by stepping outside with this guy and all his friends—all his well-armed redneck friends who were crowding around me. I stayed calm, though, still not feeling the least bit of fear as I thought the situation out. And then when we reached the door, I suddenly started to run, leaving my jacket behind in one of the redneck’s hands by letting it slip off my back and even leaving them a piece of my T-shirt which they ripped off as I ran. It didn’t take me long to get away from them as my sudden start had taken them by surprise, and as I was also much faster than any of those fat slobs anyway.

I soon slowed to a walk and then stopped altogether when I reached the gas station at the corner, and I waited there for my shipmates to catch up. Arthur never appeared. He’d been born and raised somewhere around there, so he’d had enough sense to make a dash for safety at the first opportunity. But the other guy who’d been with us, a white Texan, soon came strolling along unmolested by the rednecks. He told me that he’d tried to come to my aid at the beginning, but that people had already pulled the guy off me before he’d gotten there. And when he told me

that, I said it was a good thing he hadn't gotten there in time to throw any punches since that would have gone against my pacifist principles.

We hung around and waited for the other two guys who'd gone out for drugs earlier, waited to warn them not to go near the bar, but when they finally came it was from a direction where we couldn't see them coming until it was already too late. So they got jumped in the parking lot by a group of rednecks. And while one of them, a black guy who'd won the Mississippi state 100-yard-dash championship a few years earlier, dodged the attackers and quickly left them in the dust, the other guy, a longhaired white kid, got knocked around a bit before he, too, managed to escape.

Some local guy out driving around looking for excitement saw what was happening, and he immediately stopped his car and pulled out a tire-iron and ran over to help our guys. But before he could reach the scene, both of them had already gotten away. He was returning to his car with disappointment written all over him when he saw me standing at the corner in my torn T-shirt, and he came over to ask if I wanted any help. He said he'd go get a bunch of his friends and come back and help us beat the shit out of those assholes, but I told him that the fight was already over and there was no use in starting it back up. He repeated his offer more than once and finally left with a look of incredulity on his face when he realized that I was serious, that I was actually going to let the beginnings of a perfectly good fight go to waste.

Back on the ship, we talked over the Experience! for the next day or two and then went on to other things. It had been a minor incident, one of no real importance in any of our lives, but there was at least one thing about it that was memorable for me. And that was the fact that, ever since that experience of meeting someone who was so dead set on fighting that there was absolutely no way to talk him out of it, I've ceased to consider myself a pacifist.

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Hanging out in New Orleans, I was getting the urge to move on. I thought about going to southern California to see Anne. But then I thought about the presidential conventions that were going to be held in Miami Beach within a few months, and I thought about the radicals who must be there already, planning and preparing the demonstrations that would take place. And so when I left New Orleans, I headed east instead of west. I mean, what the hell? Love was one thing, but this was the revolution. The Revolution!

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I'd been making slow progress along the Gulf Coast, and I was still only in Mississippi when a guy in an old school bus pulled over and gave me a ride. The bus had been converted into a travelling home furnished with beds and couches, and it was already half-full of hitchhikers when I got on, hitchhikers who generally had the appearance of being experienced knights-of-the-road like myself. They welcomed me aboard and asked me where I was going and where I was coming from and all that, and then one of them said, "Like I was sayin'," and finished telling a story that had been interrupted by my arrival. Another guy answered him by telling a story of his own, after which I told one. And the ride quickly became a general story-telling

session of true and nearly-true and probably-not-true road stories, stories that seemed to grow more exciting and more dramatic as the session went on.

By this time I'd put in enough miles on the road to where I had a good collection of stories at my command, stories that I'd lived and stories that I'd heard from different people I'd met along the way. And as the session heated up into ever more amazing stories, I finally decided that the time was right to pull out the most extreme story I'd ever heard: the story of the leg-less hitchhiker.

It was a story I'd heard from a guy who claimed to be the one who picked him up at the end of his ordeal, an ordeal that began when the leg-less hitchhiker got dropped off in some two-bit desert town where it was illegal to hitchhike in town. Well, in this town the local police, being champions of law and order and wanting to protect their town from dangerous characters like him, drove him out into the desert and then left him there without food or water. And according to the story, he spent three days out there before finally getting a ride. Three days during which the only thing he had to eat or drink was the cup of coffee that the cops brought him each morning when they came by to see whether or not he was still alive. And the lack of sustenance wasn't his only problem, either, as on at least one morning he awoke to find himself surrounded by coyotes who were sniffing around to see if he was dead and ready to eat yet.

I unleashed that story on the other road-freaks on the bus, and it made quite a sensation. In fact, it brought the session to an end as none of them would even try to top it. And so instead of continuing with the general conversation, I now began talking to the guy seated next to me, a quiet, thoughtful blonde guy who said his name was Chip. And when I asked him where he was coming from, he told me Panama. He said he'd been hitching all the way up through Central America and Mexico after having taken a ship to Panama from Australia, and as I asked him about the events that had led him to Australia, I found that his story just kept getting more and more interesting. He told me about the couple of years he'd just spent wandering around Africa and then Asia before finally going to Australia and picking up enough work there to pay his passage to Panama. I told him that it sounded like one hell of a story to me, and he said that I'd done some pretty interesting things, too, in spite of the fact that most of my wanderings had been restricted to the USA.

The two of us quickly became friends. We became brothers, brothers-of-the-road. And we had such a good time hanging out together that when the driver offered to let us come over and stay at his place for a few days, we immediately said yes.

The driver was a hippie guy who made his living by driving back and forth to Mexico, buying pottery down there and then taking it to Cocoa Beach where he lived and selling it in flea markets. He was a good guy and an interesting one, and he fit in so well with Chip and me that the two of us couldn't turn down his offer to stay around for awhile. Cocoa Beach was out of Chip's way—he was going to the town in upstate New York where he grew up—and stopping off there would keep me away from the revolution for a few more days. But neither of us really cared since the vibe was so good. We just had to spend more time together talking and hanging out on the beach and just generally enjoying ourselves. After that, there would still be plenty of time for each of us to get to where he was going.

The revolution could wait.

THE REVOLUTION

I had no contacts and no addresses in Miami, so the first thing I did when I got there was to go to the local underground paper, the *Daily Planet*, and ask the people there to put me in contact with the Yippies. Now, I didn't know it at the time, but the Yippies had recently split into two factions. And the only faction that was already set up in town was the so-called Zippie faction. The Zippies were a bunch of young radicals who thought that Abbie and Jerry—Hoffman and Rubin, that is—had sold-out and joined the establishment by supporting McGovern for president. And so they had split off and formed their own “party” dedicated to reviving the old, anarchic spirit of the Yippies.

The Zippie who came down to the *Planet* was a longhaired guy of around my own age who introduced himself as Tom. He seemed like good people to me, a real straight-shooter, and he evidently believed my story, too, about being fresh off the road. Because after we'd talked for a few minutes, and after he'd looked me over—road-dirty and carrying my sleeping bag and my little homemade sea-bag—he invited me to come and move in with them. We drove to the little stucco house they'd rented in Coconut Grove, and I met some of the six or eight other people who were staying there at the time. The exact number living in the house would be hard to say, though, since people were arriving almost every day and there were also a few who were leaving. I moved in and told them that I'd do what I could for the revolution, but the truth is that I had very little to offer. I had no experience as an organizer, so about the only things I could do were to run errands or hand out copies of the free newspaper of which they were just in the process of publishing the first edition.

Word came down that a new group called the Tribal Rangers was being formed to act as monitors and peacekeepers during the demonstrations, and Tom recommended that I go down and join up and act as a liaison or something like that. So I went to the first meeting of the Rangers and also the early training sessions, all of which were held at the *Planet* building. And I also participated in their first practical peacemaking session out at Virginia Key that weekend. Because over the last few weeks, it seemed that the Miami pigs had been using the weekly free concerts held out on the key as opportunities to get in a little riot training. They'd been going to the concerts in force each week and making heavy-handed drug busts right in the middle of the crowd and then shooting off teargas when people had complained, thereby turning each concert into a full-fledged riot. And then, of course, they'd used the riots they'd created to practice their crowd-control techniques and all the rest. Well, the Tribal Rangers decided to use that week's concert for practice, too, and after making an agreement with the police to leave the people at the concert alone and only patrol the periphery while we controlled the crowd, we managed to keep things peaceful that week. But what happened with the Tribal Rangers after that, I don't know since they soon decided to purge themselves of all non-locals, which meant me along with a few others. And with that purge, I found myself right back at the Zippie house full time, hanging around with almost nothing to do.

Tom next sent me down to the Hare Krishnas who were planning on serving meals to people staying in the park during the demonstrations—serving meals and chanting, of course. But there's not really very much you can do as a liaison with the Hare Krishnas, not much

besides chant with them from time to time. And so between my uselessness and my growing boredom, it wasn't long before a mutual disillusionment began set in between the Zippies and myself. As days went by, the Zippies seemed to wonder more and more why some guy like me, who didn't fit in and who had nothing to contribute anyway, was still hanging around. And I, too, asked myself many questions about what exactly I was doing there. I asked myself and, increasingly, I asked whoever I happened to be talking with at the time.

Maybe the problem was the fact that the people at the house didn't live up to the Yippie myth that I'd still believed when I first arrived, the myth about them being a bunch of politicized freeks, a bunch of radicalized hippies and dropouts and other counter-culture types. Because as I got to know them, it became increasingly apparent to me that most of them were actually a bunch of freekicized politicians, a bunch of standard-issue leftwing politicians who had simply added a few freek trappings to what were really pretty typical political-activist personalities.

This reality of their being politicians first and freeks second was probably the thing that was alienating me from so many of them the most. And it was definitely this reality that was causing so much of the infighting that was going on within the Yippies—the infighting between the Zippies and the “official” faction. And after I'd been there for a week and a half or so, I had a chance to see some of that infighting close-up. I saw it during the confab that was held at the house. The confab was supposed to be a sort of Yippie convention that had been called by the Zippies, but since anyone and everyone who happened to walk in the door could vote—including not only members of the rival faction but also the various undercover cops who came in to spy on the meeting—the whole thing soon spun out of control. Abbie and Jerry, who had just arrived in town, came in with a group of their friends and supporters, and soon there were accusations flying all over the room. At one point Abbie was on his feet ready to throw punches at one of the Zippies before he was restrained. And finally, the “official” faction took over the meeting and pushed through a whole series of inflammatory resolutions, resolutions that seemed to be aimed at turning the rift within the party into a gaping chasm.

Some of the people in the Zippie house were seriously upset by the confrontations at the confab, and over the next few days, they kept arguing the same points over and over again. But as for me, I couldn't support either faction. I didn't think very much of what either side had to say, and with the exception of Tom and maybe Jerry Rubin, I didn't even like any of them. I felt almost no human connection with them whatsoever. And so instead of taking sides, I felt myself dropping right out the middle as the two factions split farther and farther apart.

My enthusiasm and my commitment were waning quickly, and the house was becoming way too crowded for my tastes as more and more of their people kept showing up in town and moving in. But still I didn't leave until I was finally thrown out. And it was funny the way it all happened, too, because while my disillusionment had been a gradually growing thing, my getting thrown out came about all at once, with no prior warning. It came right out of the blue. Because there we were one day, sitting around at a sort of meeting, when one of the women started saying that she didn't feel comfortable with one of the people there. And as I looked around to see who she meant, I was shocked to see that she was looking at me. She and everyone else were sitting there looking straight at me. And in no time at all, other people began speaking up against me, too, all of them raising suspicions about my being a pig. And so no sooner was the meeting over than I was gone.

Tom gave me a ride to some fleabag hotel, and he told me along the way that he didn't think I was a pig. He'd seen me in all my road-freak glory that first day I'd come into town and knew that I was the real thing. I thanked him for his confidence in me and said goodbye, knowing that I wouldn't be seeing much more of him as I was obviously no longer welcome at the house. And if I couldn't go to the house, then what else could I do for the revolution?

So I'd been a washout as a revolutionary. I'd already done what little I could, and I had nothing more to offer the Yippies or the Zippies or any of the rest of them. But while I'd been a failure as a revolutionary, there was still one thing that I was good at, and that was getting back out onto the road.

(Fragments)

The driver dropped the three of us off right where the freeway split in Jacksonville, right where he turned west on I-10 rather than continuing north on I-95 where we wanted to go. The other two guys, who were travelling together, decided to stay and hitch right where we'd been dropped off, but I didn't think it looked like a very good spot to me, so I wished them luck and then started walking up the road. I'd gone about a mile or so when a cop pulled over in front of me and told me over the loudspeaker to get off the freeway. Now!! I thought it might be a good idea to talk to him a bit, to play dumb and ask him about Florida's hitchhiking laws and that sort of thing, but I'd only gone a few steps when he suddenly jumped out of the car and put his hand on his gun. I stopped right where I was and asked him a question or two, but he wasn't a bit helpful. All he told me was to get off the freeway and get off it right now. Or else!

As I was standing there talking, I noticed that he wasn't alone in the car, because sitting in the backseat were the same two guys who'd just gotten dropped off with me a little bit earlier. They were on their way to jail right then, and I could see that the only reason the cop didn't want to take me along, too, was because the car was already full. That and the fact that I'd only been walking, not hitchhiking, at the moment he came by.

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I was just about to start hitching toward Miami Beach after having spent a few days camping out near Ocala, but I figured that before I left, I ought to walk down to the little store a half-mile or so away and get something to drink. I left my gear sitting right where it was by the road rather than hiding it like I always did, because I figured that in this case, there was so little traffic on the highway that there was no need to worry. I'd just left the store and was walking back toward my gear when I got a ride from a guy who, as chance would have it, was also on his way to the demonstrations. I had him stop where my gear had been, but to my surprise, there was nothing left. Nothing but my old steel-toed boots. Someone had ripped off all the rest of my gear. Some asshole! And not only was the guy an asshole, but I myself was an idiot, a complete idiot for leaving my gear out in the open, something I knew better than to have done.

I knew right away that the sleeping-bag was gone forever, but I held out some hope that maybe the guy would toss the sea-bag out the window once he'd gone through the contents. And as it turned out, I was right, because some four or five miles down the road I recovered the sea-bag minus a few minor items. So I'd been lucky and gotten my books and my ragged old clothes

back. I wouldn't have to wear the same clothes for the next month, and the only price I'd have to pay for my stupidity would be to sleep without a sleeping-bag until further notice. But that was no big hassle given the fact that it was summer and I was in Florida.

A PARTY IS BORN

We got to Miami Beach just in time to camp out in the park the first night people were allowed to do so. And while the driver went off in some direction or other, I chose to spend the night under the big old oak tree, the biggest tree in the park. There were six or seven other guys who slept there, too, and when we got up the next morning, the bunch of us sat around together under the tree and shot the shit. We made a pretty motley group both in appearance and in politics, as it soon became apparent from our conversation that all of us were simply road-freaks who had come more for a good time than for any clear political or ideological reasons. And while all of us probably fell more-or-less within the Yippie camp, not one of us had any real understanding of the politics of the time. In fact, when I started explaining to them the details of the split within the Yippies that I'd witnessed a couple months earlier, I was surprised to find that none of them was even aware that there had been such a split.

So we didn't talk much about politics since none of us knew very much, and instead we spent our time smoking dope and telling stories. One long, lean, spacey guy who spent the whole morning sitting up on one of the big branches of the tree seemed to have an endless supply of dope, and he kept rolling joints and tossing them down. And we smoked them and passed them around to whoever came by, making it a special point to offer them to the undercover pigs who were always hanging around listening to us. Whenever we did, they'd give some lame excuse for not accepting the joints, and then they'd leave a little while later knowing that their covers had been blown. They'd leave and I'm sure they'd report immediately to their superiors with all the valuable information they'd managed to gather about the revolution by listening to our bullshit stories.

The only time we openly discussed politics that morning was when I described my experiences in the Zippie house. And other than that, the most political thing we ever discussed was when one of the guys, a loud, cowboy-hat-wearing hippie from Ann Arbor, talked about his buddy who was in jail over in Miami. Because you see, while Miami Beach had a policy of tolerance toward demonstrators, the city of Miami had a policy of busting all longhairs on sight, and this guy's friend had unfortunately fallen into the trap. He'd been walking down the street minding his own business, and since he'd seen a pig watching him closely and didn't want to get busted for jay-walking, he'd stopped at a corner and waited for the light to change. But since it was open season on freaks, that little precaution hadn't done him any good, because the pig came over and busted him anyway. And when he'd asked on what charge, the cop had said loitering. After all, he'd stopped walking there at the corner, hadn't he? We all agreed that a terrible injustice had been done in this case, but then all we did in reply was to curse the pigs and smoke a few more joints—and of course we told more stories.

A little after noon, having munched down on the food that someone had donated to the people staying in the park and having pretty well run out of stories to tell, this guy from Wisconsin with a head-band and a gas-station shirt interrupted the fading conversation by saying, "Hey, let's put up a sign." We agreed that it was a good idea, and so once we'd scrounged up a

piece of cardboard and a magic marker, we started trying to come up with a slogan to write on it. We hadn't been at it for long when the same ex-gas-jockey said, "Why don't we write 'Pot People's Party' on it?" And as this proved to be a popular suggestion, the sign was soon made and put on display.

It seemed like no more than a moment after we'd hung up the sign in the tree that newsies started coming around wanting to interview us and wanting us to explain our platform to them. We had no platform to explain, of course, and we hemmed and hawed around for awhile until one of the guys finally told them to come back later. He said that we'd hold a press conference the next day at noon and that we'd present our platform then. This left us with a new problem, though, the problem of coming up with a platform to present, and so during the next few hours, whenever there was a lull between assaults by the newsies, we debated our platform.

There was one frizzy-haired guy from Brooklyn who wanted to come up with a formal platform and a list of demands and the whole nine yards, but the rest of us were opposed to that idea, and I was especially adamant in my opposition. My experiences as an organizer had left me seriously burnt-out on traditional radical politics, which I considered to be not only a lot of empty, ego-stroking bullshit, but also a complete waste of time. It seemed to me that all the radicals were doing was yelling at a deaf government, and I figured that if the government wasn't going to listen to us anyway, we may as well laugh and make fun of it and enjoy ourselves. So I eagerly supported it when someone finally came up with a good, fun platform for our party, a platform that consisted of rolling up a bunch of joints and handing them out at the press conference and saying, "This is our platform," and nothing more.

The guy from Brooklyn didn't think much of our platform, but he had no choice but to go along with the decision of the majority. And besides, we soon found a position within the "party" that was more to his liking as, in addition to the newsies who were constantly coming around and talking to us, some of the leaders from the different political parties in the park also came by. And one of them soon invited us to send a representative to the park council, the governing body for the demonstrators in the park. We naturally chose to send the guy from Brooklyn since he was the only one of us temperamentally suited to serving on such a council. And he was truly grateful to one and all for the chance we gave him to mix with the big-time radicals.

We spent the rest of the afternoon being visited by various radical leaders, including a few of the mainstream civil rights leaders, and being interviewed by the newsies who were prowling around in desperate search of a story. The oldest guy in our group, a bald-headed drifter and truck-driver who was originally from Alaska, gave a particularly good interview at one point, as after telling the newsy that he was from Alaska, the guy asked, "How long did it take for you to get here?" "Five years," he said, and then he went on to give similar answers to the rest of the questions he was asked.

The next morning when we got up, we began making preparations for the press conference that we'd set for noon that day, which meant that we began inventorying our dope supply to see whether or not we'd have enough to hand out to the newsies when they came around. But to our disappointment, we discovered that dope was in short supply and that even the guy in the tree had nearly exhausted his stash. So we took up a collection and sent one of the guys out with a Cuban dope dealer who'd been hanging around, but the guy came back later and

told us that he'd been ripped off. And that left us in something of a bind, because if we had no dope, we had no platform, and the time of the press conference was fast approaching. We all decided not to worry about it, though. We'd just smoke whatever dope we had left, and then we'd wing it when the time came for the press conference.

The area under the tree began to fill up with newsies as the time approached, and there were cameras and microphones all over the place as a little group of us, spontaneously reinforced by newcomers and various hangers-on from around the park, stood facing them holding a few pro-pot-smoking signs that someone had made. We stood there in silence, and soon the newsies grew impatient, yelling questions at us and waiting for some response. But we just stood there and said nothing. Then finally the guy from Ann Arbor decided that something had to be done to save our press conference, and he came forward and began rapping. He started off talking about the injustice of locking people up for smoking a harmless herb like pot, and he went on to condemn the gestapo mentality that made that injustice possible and to condemn the sick, distorted society that made that gestapo mentality possible and so on.

All the usual bullshit.

He'd been rapping along for some time when a little old grey-haired lady who lived in Miami Beach came up and interrupted him with a demand to be heard. She insisted on speaking and began by saying that we shouldn't be trying to legalize pot, a suggestion to which we all reacted with open hostility. But then she kept right on going and finished her thought by saying that instead we should be trying to change the society that drives people to smoking pot in the first place. And once we'd heard her full statement and knew that she was on our side after all, we ceased our hostility and invited her to come over and join us. She did so gladly and took one of the signs that someone handed her, a sign that said, "We smoke pot and we like it a lot." And after that she stood there with us smiling away while the newsies crowded around taking pictures. And do you know what? It was that picture of the little old lady standing there surrounded by freeks and holding the sign that made all the papers the next day. Just the picture with no commentary on what had been said, since nothing we'd said was deemed to be newsworthy.

The Pot People's Party turned out to be a very popular party, the biggest and most popular one in the park, in fact, as more and more people kept coming to hang out under the big tree and get stoned all day long. It got to be so big and so crowded that by the time the convention actually started, all the original members had already been crowded out and had gone to live elsewhere in the park. All of us but the guy from Brooklyn, that is, who still spent his time in the crowd under the tree whenever he wasn't at meetings of the park council.

(Fragments)

It was late in the evening when the group of gay rights activists from whom I'd bummed a ride to North Carolina decided to stop at a little café in Georgia and have some coffee. The four of us walked in and sat down at the counter and ordered coffee, and then one of the guys asked for the sugar. I was sitting on the end of the group nearest the sugar dispenser, but even I wasn't all that close to it as it was actually just on the other side of the dried-up little redneck who was sitting next to me. I asked the guy to pass it, but he just stared straight ahead and acted like he

hadn't heard me. And he continued to ignore me when I asked him for it once again. So seeing what he was up to, I didn't bother saying anything else after that. I just laughed a little at the ignorant asshole and then reached over in front of him for the sugar, making it a point to jostle him a little bit with my elbow as I did so.

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I had to take a pee and, feeling too liberated at the time to bother searching out a place to hide myself from view of the road, I merely turned to the bushes behind me and started relieving myself. I heard honking and turned to see some guy in a car going by yelling and shaking his fist at me. The guy was alone in the car, he didn't even have his wife with him, so I couldn't understand why he was so excited.

Go take your hang-ups out on someone else, you asshole. All I'm doing is performing a normal bodily function. I'm not doing anything dirty or perverted. I'm just taking a pee. And at least I turned my back to the road, didn't I?

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I heard about a planned reenactment of the Wobblies' famous Overalls Brigade that would be taking place soon, a reenactment in which a group of modern Wobblies would be hopping freight trains from the west coast to Chicago and holding rallies along the way just like the original brigade had done. Gene, who was organizing the reenactment, hoped it would help spark the rebirth of the union in the same way the original Overalls Brigade had helped spark the union's early growth. As for myself, I wasn't all that sure it would lead to anything, but after the disillusionment with politics that I'd experienced in Miami, I thought the Wobblies' economic revolution might be just the revolution for me. And when you throw in the fact that the trip sounded like a great time, I didn't think twice before volunteering to go along.

I got to the place in Berkeley where we were supposed to gather, and I immediately suffered a major disillusionment with the modern Wobblies when Gene told me that it looked like the two of us were going to be the entire brigade, that everyone else who had said they were interested in going had backed out and that we were down to just us. He asked me if I still wanted to go along for the ride—there would be no rallies with only two of us—and I said I did. And so we headed for the Oakland freight-yards.

Our train broke up in Portola, and while we were waiting there for the next eastbound train, we started talking to a black guy named Ed. He said he was on his way to Idaho for the potato harvest, but he soon changed his mind and decided to come along with us. And so from Portola on, there were three of us in the brigade. We stopped off in Salt Lake City and drank free beers at the One Big Union Bar, and then it was on to Chicago.

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Knowing that the next train would take us clear to Chicago, we thought that maybe we should celebrate a bit, and after pooling our meager financial resources, we went into a liquor store and bought a pint of cheap bourbon. We passed the bottle around but soon concluded that it would go down easier if we cut it with a little water. So we poured out half the water in one of

our canteens and then refilled it with whisky. The stuff tasted a bit better that way, and we passed the canteen around until it was all gone.

We walked up and down the train but couldn't find a single empty boxcar or other good place to ride. The only empty car we could find on the whole train was a flatcar, which we climbed aboard while resigning ourselves to a miserable, windy ride to Chicago. The whiskey helped keep our spirits up, though, and as the train began to roll, we even sang some of the Wobbly songs that Gene had taught us. We sat there on the flatcar singing "Hold the Fort" and "Solidarity Forever" and a few others, but after awhile the chilly wind started getting to us and the songs finally faded out. We wrapped ourselves up in our blankets and sleeping-bags and huddled together for protection, and we stayed like that for the rest of the trip. I hardly moved except to occasionally peak my head out from under the old, beat-up army sleeping-bag that I'd borrowed from my brother. And I swear that every time I looked out, I could see that the bag had grown thinner as it left a trail of feathers stretching all the way to Chicago.

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It was early morning when the train pulled into Eugene. I knew it was time for me to get back out onto the highway as I lay there in my sleeping-bag, thinking dreamily about getting up. As the train slowed more and more, I was about to climb out of the sack when I saw a pair of ten-year-old kids jumping and struggling their way into the boxcar in which I was riding. They were surprised to discover that the boxcar was occupied, at least as surprised as I was at seeing the two of them, but they soon calmed down when I said hello and asked them where they were going. They told me that they were running away from home, that they were going to Roseville, near Sacramento, where one kid's grandmother lived. And no sooner had they told me of their plans than I began changing my own plans in order to stick around and take care of them. I mean, what chance did those kids have of ever reaching Roseville alive when they couldn't even tell the difference between a train entering the yard and one leaving it? And since I couldn't take them hitchhiking with me without inviting legal hassles, it meant that I'd have to stick with the freights for the rest of the trip south.

The kids and I hung around the yard in Eugene for several hours while workers broke up our train and put together a new one, and during that time I became aware of one slight problem in that I was hungry but had no food and had only five cents in my pocket. One of the kids came to my rescue, though, when he pulled out a bag of cookies and shared it with me. So the three of us hung around and ate cookies and talked and got to be friends and brothers-of-the-road in spite of our age difference. And then when a train finally pulled out for California, a train going clear through to the big yard at Roseville as one of the guys in the yard had informed me, the three of us were on it.

We rode along peacefully, the kids playing around quite a bit during the early part of the trip before they settled down into the rhythm of the long, slow freight-train grind. And we made very good time. The train hardly stopped at all in passing through the towns along the way, and we soon left Oregon behind and continued barreling along through northern California.

I was on my way to Chico to visit Jake and some of his friends from the academy who were living there. And since we'd be passing through Chico a couple of hours before the train

reached Roseville, that meant I had a decision to make on whether or not to continue on with the kids. I could see that they were okay on the train—I'd already taught them a lot about the dangers of riding freights—and as they wouldn't have to change trains along the way, I saw no reason why I shouldn't get off. After all, the kids would be okay as far as Roseville, and once they got there they'd either make their way to the grandmother's house or else they'd get picked up by the infamous Roseville bulls and sent back to Eugene. Either way, things would work out fine for them in the long run. So when the train slowed down as it passed through Chico, I jumped off and waved goodbye to the little adventurers—to my little road-brothers—and then turned and began searching for Jake's place.

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I was making my way south through Oregon once again after an unsuccessful job-hunt among the tugboat companies of Seattle, and it was after dark when I got dropped off in some small town. Since I rarely hitched at night anymore, I immediately began looking around for the local freight-yard. There was no yard to be found, but as it turned out, I did find three or four empty boxcars sitting along a siding, boxcars that I was somehow convinced would soon be heading south, so I decided to make one of them my home for the night. I was about to climb in when I realized that, hey, I didn't have a sleeping-bag and it was gonna be a cold night and I needed something to keep me warm. And with that idea in mind, I headed for a nearby liquor store where I bought a big jug of cheap wine.

I didn't know any better at the time. I thought the booze would serve as a good substitute for a blanket. I didn't know that without something warm like a sleeping-bag, it would actually make me colder rather than warmer. So in my ignorance, I bought the jug and returned to the boxcar where I began to drink. And the wine made me feel so good, it gave me such a nice, warm glow, that I ended up drinking the whole thing before curling up in a corner of the boxcar and going to sleep.

A train came by and picked up my boxcar just as I'd sensed that one would, and I lifted up my head and looked around just long enough to see that indeed we were heading south. Then I went right back to sleep and didn't wake up again until I felt my boxcar being shunted back and forth. I knew this meant that the train was either picking up more cars or else dropping some off, but I was still too drunk and too tired to get up and see what was happening. Instead, I just lay there and tried to hang onto my sleep. I was finding it increasingly difficult to do so, though, as not only was my boxcar being banged around but also the cold was starting to get to me. I lay there curled up in the fetal position and tried to stick my head under my coat, but it was no use. I was cold and I was shivering, and it just kept getting worse.

But it wasn't the cold that finally woke me up altogether. No, it was the sound of the train getting back underway, a sound not accompanied by any movement on the part of my own boxcar, which told me right then and there that I'd just been left on a siding somewhere in the middle of Oregon.

I grabbed my sea-bag and jumped out onto the ground, out into the light, steady rain that was falling, and saw that it was too late, that the train was already gone and there was nothing I could do about it. And so I began walking along the line of abandoned boxcars to see where

exactly I was. I walked along beside them until I came upon a group of workmen standing around outside a big factory-warehouse building, and I went up to the nearest one of them and asked him what was going on. He told me that they were about to begin loading the boxcars in a few minutes, and I knew right away just what that meant: it meant that my boxcar wouldn't be continuing south that night. And even more, it meant that I wouldn't be able to spend any more of the night sleeping in it since it would soon be filling up with whatever it was that they manufactured at that particular factory. It meant that I was stuck out here in the middle of nowhere, in the rain, with no shelter and no sleeping-bag.

I walked over to the main track, and there I looked as far as I could see in both directions but saw nothing at all that even resembled a shelter. I thought about going off into the woods, but that didn't seem like a very good idea given the fact that I had no camping gear with me. And I thought about walking to the highway where I could try hitching, but once again I decided against it since I had no idea of where the highway even was. No, the only thing I could do was to walk along the tracks, to walk south until a train came by or until I found some sort of shelter where I could spend the rest of the night.

I walked along the tracks, and the exercise soon warmed me up. But I knew I couldn't continue on in this way for long as the rain was rapidly soaking into my clothes. I looked ahead and thought I saw an overpass in the distance—way off in the distance—and now that became my objective. But as I got a bit closer, I could see that it wasn't an overpass after all. It was nothing but a structure to hold signal-lights above the tracks, a structure that would offer me no shelter at all from the steady, persistent rain that was falling. And so with a growing sense of foreboding, I knew that I'd have to continue walking.

Before I'd reached the structure, I saw another possible overpass way off in the distance. But as I continued on, I saw that it, too, was nothing but a group of signal-lights. My legs were starting to get tired by this time, and even worse, I could feel the rain steadily soaking through my clothes. It was already starting to drip down my back and down my legs into my boots even before I reached the second set of signal-lights, and there was still no shelter of any type in sight. I walked on and on, passing more sets of signal-lights and getting more leg-weary and wetter all the time. And in fact, my clothes were about as soaking wet as they could possibly be when I finally came around a curve in the tracks and saw a real, honest-to-god overpass a short distance ahead.

I climbed the concrete slope below the overpass and, sure enough, there was a ledge at the top, a ledge a couple of feet below the beams that held the roadway. I lay down on the ledge and made myself as comfortable as I could, but it wasn't long before the warmth I'd generated during my long walk had evaporated and the chill from my wet clothing had begun to reach me. I curled up into the fetal position and put my hands between my thighs and stuck my face as far down into my coat as I could get it, and then I lay there like that for the rest of the night. The only time I moved was when the pain caused by the hard concrete on my hip became so severe that I had to roll over onto the other side for awhile, or when I got cramps in my cold, tired feet and legs. And of course I also shivered all night long. I shivered and suffered and sought sleep desperately as the only means of escaping my freezing misery. And then finally, I got up at dawn and went out in search of the highway.

* * * * *

It was a good ride, going all the way to El Paso, but there was just one little problem. The truck's cab was already full which meant that I'd have to ride back on the flatbed all night with no protection at all. I climbed up and found a couple of other hitchhikers laid out in their sleeping-bags, but since I still didn't have a bag myself, I knew I'd have to find some other way of protecting myself from the cold air of the late fall desert night. I saw a big tarp piled up just behind the cab, and I immediately made my way toward it. I picked up one corner of it and began to crawl under but was greeted by a voice coming from beneath the tarp asking me what the hell I was doing. I apologized to my travelling companion and moved over to another part of the tarp where I tried again and, finding this new spot to be unoccupied, I proceeded to crawl in and make myself comfortable.

END OF AN ERA

Finally, after nearly two years of frantic wandering, I became aware of the fact that something was beginning to change—something inside me. I was beginning to lose the rush that I'd always gotten whenever I'd thought about heading out onto the road and seeing new places. The rush that had been so intense and so stimulating early on but that had slowly lost strength as time had gone on, slowly become shorter and milder each time until now it was beginning to disappear altogether.

I didn't know what it was. Maybe I was beginning to burn out, or maybe I was losing my craving for Experience! or maybe I was simply beginning to satisfy that craving. Maybe after so much time and so many miles, I was beginning to have enough of Experience! or at least enough of the type of Experience! that could be found on the road. Maybe I just wanted something different, something more profound than the cheap thrills of the road, something that could only be found by stopping for awhile and making a commitment to something, even if only a short commitment. Maybe what I needed was a revolution, a revolution with substance and meaning, or at least one with more meaning than the drop-out-and-bum-around revolution I'd been living so far. And it was for that reason that I decided to head for a commune in Alabama when I got off the ship, a commune I'd heard about somewhere or other.

I had the typical hippie dream of settling down someday and spending the rest of my life in a commune, but up until then I'd never stayed longer than overnight at any of the communes I'd ever visited. Up until then I'd never felt capable of making even the shortest commitment to a commune, and also up until then I'd never found a commune that was worth making a commitment to. All of them I'd visited had been dedicated to hippie hedonism or to getting-away-from-it-all or both, and I just couldn't see me committing myself to anything like that. But the commune in Alabama was supposed to be different. It was supposed to be a place for revolutionaries not for hippies, a place for people dedicated to making and spreading the revolution, a place that might be worthy of real commitment.

I got off the ship in Freeport, Texas, after a couple months of work in the oilfields—after a couple months of sharing my life with a bunch of narrow-minded rednecks—and started walking toward town. I hadn't gone far when I got a ride from two young Chicano guys who asked me where I was going. I told them I was on my way to town to look for a used car, and

they said no problem, they knew just the guy to see, and they drove me to a gas station in town. The guy who ran the station pointed to an old pickup truck parked around the back, an old 56 Chevy pickup with a small aluminum camper shell on the back, and said he could let me have it for a hundred bucks. The truck wasn't very impressive at first sight what with the way the rust almost obscured the light blue paint and with the way the door dropped down several inches when I opened it, giving the impression that it was about to fall off altogether. But once I got in and started it up and shoved it into gear, I knew right away that it was the truck for me. The motor ran great, smooth and quiet and easy, and I didn't have to listen to it for long before I shelled out the money and headed off down the road toward Alabama.

I picked up every hitchhiker I saw along the way, of course, and the truck soon filled up front and back with road-freaks and assorted fellow-travelers. Among the passengers was a hippie-looking guy named Dan who very quickly became my brother-of-the-road. Dan was the first guy I picked up, just outside Houston, which meant that he sat up front in the cab with me and with the second guy I stopped for a little further down the road. As it turned out, he'd been on the road just about as long as I had—ever since he'd gotten back from Vietnam—and so the two of us connected right away, connected and became old friends in a matter of hours. We swapped road stories and impressions and bits of philosophy as we drove along, and we also talked about our immediate plans. And when Dan told me that he was on his way to New Orleans to catch the last day or so of Mardi Gras, he'd no sooner said it than I'd already decided to go there with him.

It was way after midnight when we pulled into town so, rather than trying to catch the tail-end of the party that night, we just crashed in the truck, Dan and me and one of the other guys who had nowhere to stay. We were saving our energy for Fat Tuesday which would be the next day. In the morning we scored a lid from one of Dan's connections and then started wandering around the French Quarter stoned. We eventually wandered out to the Mississippi River and sat down along the bank in an area where there were quite a few young people hanging out. We sat there and Dan began rolling up joints and passing them around, hoping in that way to break down some of the barriers that we felt existed among the people seated there. Everyone seemed so uptight to us, so lacking in any sense of community and openness and sharing, that Dan proceeded to roll up and pass around over half his lid in an attempt—a futile attempt—to create a community where none existed.

Late that afternoon while we were still wandering around the French Quarter, we saw some guy standing on a balcony drop a dollar bill down to the street below. Three or four other people saw him do it, too, and they all rushed over and fought with each other until one of them came up with the bill. The guy on the balcony smiled bemusedly and then dropped another dollar, and this time there was an even bigger scramble as six or eight people shoved and clawed at each other in a frantic struggle for the mighty dollar. The guy on the balcony dropped several more dollars and, with each one he dropped, the fight became bigger and nastier. Dan and I stood back watching the sorry spectacle, and neither of us could believe our eyes. I couldn't believe that anyone could be so ignorant and so out of touch as to fight like an animal over a lousy little piece of paper, and Dan couldn't believe that anyone could be such an asshole as to drop the bills and then stand there giggling at the people fighting over them. Neither of us could believe that our society could actually be this sick, and we both agreed that the only answer was the revolution. The revolution that would put an end to all materialistic stupidity. The revolution that

would show us that we're all brothers and sisters and that the world is ours to share. The revolution that would... you know...

Not being sure exactly how to bring about this particular revolution, though, the two of us finally decided that the best thing we could do at that moment was to go get good and drunk, so we got hold of a couple of empty cups and started walking up and down Bourbon Street bumming refills from the people passing by. We made a few trips up and down the street, drinking whatever people gave us, and then headed for a quiet spot where we smoked a joint before returning to bum some more drinks.

We kept drinking and smoking in that way for hours until we finally started to run out of dope—and also until we'd had about all we could take of the crowds on Bourbon Street. And at that point, Dan said that we should go to some guy's place where we'd be sure to find more dope and a party and a place to crash. But I told him no. I'd already had enough for that night. I was already about as drunk and stoned as I could get, and besides, there was the revolution waiting for me in Alabama. So instead of going with him, I said goodbye, good to know you, brother, I'll see you around one of these days maybe. And with that, we went our separate ways.

I crashed in the truck that night along with that one hitchhiker who still had nowhere else to stay, and in the morning I was on my way. Before I left, the hitchhiker thanked me for my hospitality by giving me an old pair of Levi's with the legs all eaten up by battery acid. And the pants came in handy, as it turned out, since all my jeans and a number of other items I'd left in the truck had been ripped-off while it had been parked the day before. I said goodbye and wished the guy luck and started up the truck, and before long I was on my way driving north through Mississippi and then east into Alabama. I was on my way to the revolution, to the real revolution where people were "Building the new society within the shell of the old," as the Wobblies used to say. Where people were actually living out their ideas and ideals rather than simply talking about them. Where people were doing something useful with their lives rather than wasting them in the way that I'd been wasting mine.

PART II: THE LAND

As I finished my breakfast, I said goodbye to the fire. I told it that I'd see it again that evening when I made my next camp—it or one of its friends, whichever the case may be. And then I spread out its coals and let it die.

After cleaning the dishes and filling my canteens at the creek, I began to pack my gear. And packing now was something I had to think about, something I had to do right since I no longer had the raft to carry my gear and since the distance I had to travel was much too long for me to make more than one trip. I couldn't do like I'd done at the very beginning when I'd made three separate trips between the spot along the road where the road crew had dropped me off and my first campsite along the river. And I couldn't cache part of it and travel light like I'd done when I'd explored the highlands on the north side of the river, either. No, on this occasion I had to take everything with me. I had to fit everything I had left into a single pack and that was that.

I stuffed the sleeping-bag and the plastic sheet into the lower compartment of my Canadian Army backpack, and then I put the other camping gear into the upper compartment just like I always did. Next I took the duffel bag of food and, after removing some of the dried fruit and putting it into the pockets of the backpack where it would be available to me during the day, I rolled the bag up and tied it on top of the pack. Then I tied the axe onto one side and the short-handled shovel onto the other, and I tucked the gold pan underneath the ropes on the backside of the pack. And finally I took my old rubber galoshes and tucked them under the ropes, too, where I'd have them available whenever I needed them.

I didn't like boots and never wore them. I preferred to wear an old pair of running shoes out here, which meant that I needed the galoshes in order to keep the shoes dry when I had to cross wet or marshy ground. Now I knew that my ability to reach civilization was completely dependant upon my legs, and I also knew that in carrying a heavy pack over sometimes uneven ground, I was inviting a sprained ankle. But still I felt no need for the extra support that a pair of boots would have given to my ankles. I had very strong legs, and I'd never hurt an ankle in my life no matter what I'd done to it, so I felt perfectly safe without the support—and also without the extra weight and awkwardness of a pair of boots. I felt just fine with the footwear I had on, footwear almost as light and fleet as going barefoot.

I tried out the weight of the pack once it was ready, and though it was a bit heavy, it was nothing unmanageable. I'd be able to carry it all day, that would be no problem, and I had the tump-line to use whenever my shoulders got tired. And besides that, I could always stop and take a break any time I wanted to since I was in no particular hurry and had no schedule to keep. I'd just take as long as it took me to get to the road, that was all. I'd just go at my own pace.

Before putting on the pack, I thought about returning to the river for one last goodbye but then decided against it. It would be a waste of time and energy to do so now since I'd already said my goodbyes. I'd already put the river into my past, and now it was time for me to focus on the future, on the hills and the woods that lay in my path between here and the road. Now it was time for me to look ahead, not behind. So I heaved up the big backpack, wobbling a little under its weight as I did so, and I squirmed and bounced it into a comfortable position on my back

before reaching down to pick up the rifle. And then with a final glance at the cold remains of my former friend the fire, I was on my way.

I followed a game path that angled across the big meadow in more-or-less the direction I wanted to go, in a direction that would take me down past the far end of the ridge behind the meadow. And as I walked along with gun in hand and my home on my back, I felt so exhilarated. I felt so much a part of nature, so elemental, so human, so completely in touch with my most basic and fundamental humanity.

After awhile, I began to see that the meadow wasn't actually as flat as it had appeared from a distance, and I soon came to an area that was filled with big, wide but low mounds and with game trails running everywhere you looked, game trails winding all about among the mounds. There were so many mounds and so many different trails that I found myself constantly having to make choices about which path to follow, constantly having to decide on which side to pass each of the various mounds I encountered. And while that was no problem as long as I could see the end of the ridge up ahead, as long as I could see where it was that I wanted to go, it became more difficult as time went on and as the mounds grew higher and higher, growing until they began to block my view and made me depend upon my inner sense of direction in making my decisions. That and the glimpses of the ridge that I occasionally got when passing between mounds.

After I'd weaved my way among the ever bigger mounds for half a mile, perhaps a mile, I began to think that maybe I should stop and take a look around. Maybe I should try to see where I was exactly and how I'd be able to get from here to where I wanted to go. So I selected a mound, one of the highest ones I'd come across so far, and after setting my backpack down at its base, I scrambled up the mossy slope and soon arrived at the top.

As I looked around, I saw that the mounds ended a short distance ahead. I saw that there were only a few more of them for me to pass before I would come to an open land. And as I looked up ahead at that land beyond the mounds, I could see that it stretched out in a series of gentle slopes and gradual rises in the direction I wanted to go. I could see that it stretched out flat and almost featureless with nothing more than a few scattered trees along the way, no forest and no thick bush, nothing at all to obstruct my path. And as I was now a little way past the end of the ridge that had been obstructing my view, I could finally see the big ridge far off in the distance for the first time, the ridge I was going to have to cross. So I pulled out my compass and took a sight along the course that would take me back to the road, and as I did so, I found the gap in the ridge that I'd picked out on the map the night before, the low spot that I planned to use as my crossing point. I looked at that gap, and I looked at the land between here and there, and the sight made me feel very good and very confident. It looked like this was going to be an easy hike all the way.

Once I got clear of the mounds, I began to walk directly toward the gap in the ridge which was now in plain sight. There were no game trails in this open country, but there was no need for them anyway since it was just as easy to cut across the huge, soft carpet of moss as it was to follow a trail. And since my object was always visible to me except during a few short periods when the slope of the land temporarily hid it from view, I was able to take a direct line toward it. And to make matters even better, there was just enough of a slope to the land so that it

was well drained. It was dry and there weren't all that many mosquitoes around. And though there were more of them here than there had been back among the mounds, still they weren't bad at all, and especially not when you stopped to consider what time of year it was.

So I walked along and I felt great. I had my gun, and I had my pack, and it gave me such a sense of manhood to walk along in this way. Or to be more accurate, I should say that it gave me a sense of humanhood. It made me feel like I was in touch with my humanity, in touch with humanity's very roots. Like I was human and I was nature. Like I was human in the most natural way possible. I was primitive man. I was natural man. I was the primeval hunter/gatherer walking along in complete harmony with the land.

I was a wanderer in this huge wilderness, carrying everything with me that I needed to survive. And while I felt totally in touch with my surroundings and with nature as a whole, at the same time I also felt totally independent. I felt that I could go wherever I wanted, and I could stay anywhere. I could do anything, and I could be anything. And if I should happen to face some danger along the way, why then I had my rifle and my wits with which to defend myself. I was carrying all my needs upon my back and my strength was in my hand, and between the two of them, I felt invulnerable. I felt such a tremendous sense of freedom and such independence. And isn't total independence, when combined with a total at-oneness with nature, the very highest of all possible human evolutions? Isn't that what being human is truly all about?

When I was ready to stop and eat my lunch of dried fruit, I came across a fallen log that was perfectly positioned for me to use as a seat. And that log seemed to me like one more sign of just how accommodating nature was being on this day, one more sign of just how beautifully my day was going. I was having a nearly perfect day, a day far better than anything I could ever have hoped for.

Then an hour or so after that meager lunch, as I came over a small, gentle hill, I saw a porcupine walking along a short distance ahead of me. He saw me at the same time, and immediately he began to run away. Or actually he began to waddle away as fast as a porcupine can go, which isn't very fast at all. He headed straight for a nearby tree and began to climb it, but the tree was so small that the poor guy could only climb until he was about level with my head before he had to stop. And after that, he just hung there in the tree looking at me warily and doing his best to hide the fear that he must have felt at that moment. He seemed to be under the impression that I was the hunter, which of course would have made him the hunted. And now that poor little fella had run away until he had nowhere left to go, nothing to do but prepare to defend himself in the best way he could. Nothing to do but hang there and watch me and await my attack.

But he was wrong about me. I wasn't the hunter, and he wasn't the hunted. I had no intention of harming him. I had no interest in him whatsoever. Our relationship wasn't that of hunter-hunted. Our relationship was one of indifference, the other great natural relationship that exists between species. He meant nothing to me, and I meant no harm to him. We were simply two creatures passing each other in the wilderness. So after staring at him for a minute or two, after satisfying my curiosity at seeing him, I simply shrugged my shoulders and continued on my way. I knew I couldn't tell him that he had nothing to fear from me. He'd never have understood. So the only way I could prove my indifference to him was through my actions, through going

away and leaving him in peace, which was exactly what I did. I walked away and never looked back.

I walked on and on over that gentle land, and as the day wore on, my exhilaration of the morning steadily wore off. It was a long hike I had to make today and over the next few days, and even under these ideal conditions, the walking was becoming more difficult and more tiring as time went on. Even a day as beautiful as today was turning out to be a very long one. I walked and walked, and finally I reached the base of the ridge that I'd seen earlier from so many miles away. I reached the ridge and began to climb, and it wasn't long before I lost sight of my goal, lost sight of the gap where I intended to cross over. But as I climbed, I noticed a small creek off to my right. And judging from the way it came down the ridge, I knew it must have its source in the gap, which meant that I now had a new type of guide. I now had the creek to guide me and show me the way to the top.

As I climbed the ridge, I entered a forest for the first time all day. But still it was an open forest, one where the trees and the clumps of bush were spaced far enough apart to offer no real obstacle to my progress. There was always enough room to pass around them unimpeded and to continue following the creek uphill—always uphill. My legs were getting more and more tired with each step I took, and I had to interrupt my climb several times to sit and rest. I was nearing the end of my strength. But as I was also nearing the end of the day, I began to think about where I should stop and make my camp for the night. The creek was growing smaller all the time, and it was reaching the point where if I were to continue on much further, it would soon become too small even to fill the canteens in it. So not wanting to reach that extremity, I picked out a nice, level, clear spot near the creek and said to myself that this was it. This spot was going to be my home for the night.

I untied my pack and got out the axe and spokeshave, and I soon brought my old friend the fire back to life. I told it that I'd missed it during the day and that I was glad to see it again now. And then once the greetings were finished, I got out the cooking pot and the beans and began the long, slow process of cooking my supper—my supper and my breakfast. There were a lot of things I wanted to talk over with the fire, but I knew that first I should take care of practical matters. First I should set up camp and finish preparing my meal, and also first I should study the map and see where I was and how far I'd gone and how far I still had to go in the days to follow.

As I looked at the map, I saw that I'd come a long way in one day of hiking, probably well over a third of the way to the road. But I knew that this walking today had been unusually easy, much easier than anything I could expect to face in the future since it had been so much easier than anything I'd experienced up until now. It had been extremely easy compared to the place where I'd first hiked down to the river from the road, and it had also been much easier than anyplace I'd gone when I'd been over on the north bank of the river. So given that fact, I held out little hope that the easy going would continue for very much longer.

And in fact as I studied the map, the land beyond the ridge appeared to be much steeper than the places I'd covered today. It appeared to consist of a whole series of hills and ridges that went on for many miles. And then looking beyond those hills, I saw a lake, a small lake with no name that lay about half the distance from my present camp to the road. And I told myself that I'd try to reach that lake tomorrow, that nondescript little lake, that one of the thousands of

nameless lakes that dot this huge land, far too small and insignificant to ever have been noticed and named by humanity.

But would I be able to make it there in one day? That would all depend on the land, on whether or not it chose to be as kind to me tomorrow as it had been today.

Wait a minute, did I just say kind? Did I say that the land, or that nature, has been kind? What am I talking about? I know better than that. I know that nature isn't kind. I know that nature is indifferent.

Cruelty and indifference, those are the ways of nature: the cruelty of the predators, and the indifference of everyone and everything else. That's what nature is all about. And the only kindness that can ever be found comes from the solidarity of your own species. It comes from your fellow humans, because nature itself is totally indifferent to your suffering or your survival. Why, if I'd fallen and hurt my leg today, or if I'd been attacked by a bear, no one and nothing out here would have come to my assistance. Nothing would have helped me, and there would have been no kindness coming from anywhere.

This is a hard land and it's a cold land, cold when it comes to winter temperatures and cold-hearted, too. And it was his awareness of this coldness, of this cruelty and this indifference, that I saw in the face of that porcupine. It wasn't fear so much as it was knowledge: knowledge that he was alone in the face of a potential predator, knowledge that while he was faced with my potential cruelty, he was also surrounded on all sides by indifference. And it was his realization of this fact, his realization and his determination to...

Wait, what just happened? Oh, the sticks in the fire moved and I almost spilled the beans. I've gotta be more careful.

I told myself to stop spacing out, to pay attention to what I was doing. I had to get this meal ready and then I could talk to the fire all I wanted. I had to concentrate on what I was doing. So I tended the fire, and I tended the beans, and when the time came I added the rice and the spices. And then when the meal was finally ready, I sat back and ate.

Okay fine, now we can talk. We can talk about... You know what I'd really like to talk about right now? I'd like to talk about the way I felt this morning. I'd like to talk about the high, about the exhilaration, about the... about the freedom! Because that's what it was. It was freedom. It was that sense of freedom, that overpowering sense of absolute freedom that I felt today. And you know how much I've always cared about freedom, don't you? Or do you? Have I ever told you about it? Or have you ever read it in my mind?

Freedom, that's what it's all about. That's what it's always been about for me. It was freedom that got me involved in the Revolution! with capital R and exclamation point. It was freedom and nothing else. I mean, I cared about the war and racism and all that sort of stuff, but to me those things were always secondary to the cause of freedom. What I really wanted was absolute freedom, a national rebirth of freedom, because that's what the country truly needs is that type of rebirth. And to my way of thinking, the lack of any real interest in freedom among its citizens is the biggest thing that's wrong with the country.

I mean, the United States should be the freest country in the world, the freest and the best, but it's not and it hasn't been for a long time. And we have no one to blame for that fact but ourselves. It's our own fault that we're not free. It's our own fault that we value freedom so little and that we throw it away so cheaply. And the funny thing is that at the same time as we're throwing away the reality of freedom, we're constantly paying lip service to it. We talk and talk about it. We talk about freedom all the time, but then when the time comes, we don't live it. Why, we probably don't even know how to live it. We probably couldn't live it if we tried.

It reminds me of that phrase of Samuel Butler's where he talked about Christianity but which can be rewritten to apply perfectly well to freedom in the USA: The people of the United States would be equally horrified at hearing freedom doubted and at seeing it practiced. And it was for that exact reason that I joined the movement. It was because I wanted to be free and to horrify people with my freedom. It was because I wanted to be as free as it's possible to be.

But then when I got into the movement itself, I found that no one there really cared about freedom, either, no more than anyone else in the country did. I found that all of them had their agendas and their causes and their campaigns, but that none of them were fighting for freedom. Only me, I was the only one. Or at least I wanted to fight for it, and I tried to fight for it in my own way. I tried to be a one-man crusade for freedom. Do you know what I mean?

The fire said nothing. The fire only listened.

I mean this feeling I had today was the greatest feeling I've ever had. It was the greatest feeling of freedom. Even greater than that first time I hitchhiked across the country and got that ride across the Nevada desert. That time when I felt like I was on a magic carpet or something, like I had the whole country stretching out before me as I floated along just above it...

But what's that you say? You say that feeling was an illusion? Is that what you say? You say that freedom is nothing but an illusion?

The fire hadn't said a thing.

No, it's not an illusion. It can't be an illusion. It's too strong. It's too real. The feeling is too much a part of my being to be an illusion. Because I'm not an illusion, am I? I'm real! And I know that the feeling has to be real, too. I know that freedom has to be real. It just has to be!

The Revolution! that was an illusion. But not freedom. Freedom's not an illusion.

CHAPTER ONE

Where the hell is the town? Greg asked himself as he rattled along in his rusty old pickup truck, the town where the commune was supposed to be located. According to his map he should be there by now, but as he looked around, he didn't see a town anywhere. All he saw were farmhouses and countryside, lush green deep southern countryside. Then at last he saw the sign up ahead, up near a crossroads. But what he still didn't see was a town, because all there was to see at the crossroads was a single building, a big old dilapidated place that stood there all by itself. He slowed down as he approached the building and looked it over. It appeared to be a sort

of combination gas-station/garage/café and maybe even store, and as he saw no other place around where he could stop and ask for directions, he pulled into the parking lot and parked by the door to the café.

This must be it, he told himself. This building must be the town.

He got out of his truck and looked around some more, but this place was all there was to be seen. So he strolled over and opened the flimsy screen door of the café and went inside. The place was almost as rundown on the inside as it was outside, and there were several customers seated at the counter, all of them fairly typical-looking small town southern white men. Standing behind the counter there was another man of the same type as the customers who, after looking Greg over for a moment—looking disapprovingly at his shaggy hair and his beard and his ragged clothes—said to him in a loud voice so that all his buddies would hear, “What are you? Part of the zoo comin’ through here?”

Greg knew a lot about rednecks by this time, and he knew that when they were in a joking mood like this guy seemed to be, the best thing to do was to go along with them. So for that reason, he just grinned and nodded his head in answer, acting as though the question had actually been funny. And then after waiting for what seemed like a decent interval, he got right down to the business at hand. “No, I’m lookin’ for somebody.”

“Around here?” The redneck seemed to find that hard to believe.

“Yeah, I’m lookin’ for a friend. I came here to help him out.”

And no sooner had Greg said it than the guy behind the counter’s attitude began to change. The hostility began to disappear, and when he asked his next question, he did so in a tone that could almost be considered friendly, “Oh, yeah, what’s his name? I can probably help you.”

“Well, it’s not actually a guy. It’s a commune I’m looking for. A place called Liberation Farm.”

And no sooner had Greg said it than the guy went redneck on him again, blurting out, “You mean Love City,” and then turning away to talk to his buddies at the counter. He talked to them in his loud, show-off voice, telling them all about the free love that he knew went on at the commune. He told about how some hippie girls from the farm had come by and offered him free love in exchange for food and how he had turned them down for being too dirty or too ugly or something. And after that, he went on to describe a few more typical redneck fantasies about promiscuous young hippie girls. He told story after story and the whole time he did so, he completely ignored Greg who remained standing there by the counter.

But Greg refused to let himself be intimidated, and he refused to let himself be brushed off either, so he stood his ground. He stood where he was, and he waited for his answer. He stood there until the redneck’s stories started to lose steam. He stood there and he waited, but even when the redneck and his buddies had completely run out of hippie girl stories to tell, the guy still refused to speak to Greg or to answer his question or even so much as look at him.

Then finally the customer seated at the counter nearest to Greg broke the stalemate by leaning over a bit and speaking to him. And he spoke in a low voice, almost in a whisper, as though he didn't want his buddies to hear what he was saying as he gave directions to the farm. Greg thanked the guy for the information, and then with a certain bravado, he thanked one and all in the café for their help. And he especially smiled at the redneck behind the counter and wished him well as he strutted back outside and got into his truck, acting as though he was completely unaware of the unfriendly stares that followed him as he went.

Once he started up his old truck, he pulled back out onto the highway in the direction he'd been told to go. And then after having gone a short distance, he turned off the main road onto a smaller one where he drove along slowly, reading the numbers on the mailboxes and looking for the one that he knew corresponded to Liberation Farm. He finally found the box in a small cluster of boxes by a dirt road that led off to the left. He looked at the box, and he looked at the road, and then he looked up at the big sign that someone had mounted by the road, a sign that had the words "Ho Chi Minh Trail" painted on it in big letters along with an arrow which pointed up the road.

Wow, these people must really be serious putting up a sign like that, thought Greg. And especially doing it around here in a place like this. Why, it's like a standing invitation to the Klan to come in here and do their worst. These people must be truly hardcore.

As Greg drove up the dirt road, he passed several farmhouses of unpainted wood, houses with an air of poverty about them though not one of misery. This area where the farm was located was right in the heart of Alabama's black belt, right where the great plantations used to be back when they still had slavery and back when the land was still fertile. And while there were still a number of plantations in existence nearby, plantations that were now worked by share-croppers instead of slaves, the land in this particular area around the farm was owned by poor black families in very small parcels.

As he neared the end of the road, he began to catch glimpses of a larger place through the trees, a place with a house—with two houses—and with a barn. And then as he approached near enough to get an unobstructed view, he said to himself that this must be it. This must be Liberation Farm. Or to give the full name which Greg was soon to learn, this must be National Liberation Farm, named in honor of the struggle for "liberation" in Vietnam.

There was no gate at the property line, so he was able to drive right into the big, tear-drop-shaped driveway, and as he drove, he continued to look the place over. The main farmhouse, which was quite a bit bigger than the houses he'd passed earlier and which seemed to be made of better materials, stood at the far end of the driveway. Off to the left of the house he could see a barn and a couple of sheds, while on the right side of the driveway there stood an A-frame building made out of plywood.

Greg's first impression upon seeing the place was one of disappointment, of feeling that somehow it didn't fit in with his idealized vision of communes. Because to him, communes were a sort of promised land, a paradise where he hoped to settle down someday and spend the rest of his life. Someday when he grew tired of the wandering life that he currently led, that is. But somehow this place didn't fit in with that vision at all. And it also didn't fit in with his earlier

experiences with communes, with the visits he'd previously paid to the "free land" communes in California's Russian River area.

For one thing, it looked absolutely nothing like those places with their many improvised structures, their sometimes strange, often flimsy shelters scattered throughout the woods. This place looked just like a plain, ordinary old farm. And while those communes had been filled with people, with dreamers and dropouts and druggies, this place looked almost deserted. At this place there was no one in sight except for a small group of people out in the field behind the A-frame.

So Greg was disappointed at first sight. But then as he thought about it, he began to see that maybe being different wasn't really such a bad thing after all. Because while he'd been intrigued by the communes he'd visited in the past, he'd never felt that he could actually live in them or make any sort of commitment to them. And it was for that reason that now when he was finally ready to make a real commitment—a temporary one at least—he had chosen this place and the Revolution! for which it stood. He felt much better about committing himself to the Revolution! than he did to the rather pointless self-indulgence for which those other places seemed to stand.

The people working in the field consisted of three or four young black girls and an older white woman, a woman who looked like she was probably about thirty. Greg looked them over as he drove in and pulled up in front of the main farmhouse, and as he stopped, the white woman detached herself from the group and came walking over toward him. She said hello as soon as she came within range, and Greg answered her greeting. Then she gave her name and asked him his, and once those preliminaries were out of the way, Sharon asked him what exactly it was that he wanted.

"I came here to stay," Greg replied a bit hesitantly. "I mean, I'd like to stay here... if it's okay..."

"Did you write to us to say you were coming?"

Write? What was she talking about? You didn't write to communes, you just dropped in, didn't you? "No, I didn't..."

"Well, you should have. You should have asked if it was okay," she scolded gently. "You should have asked if we had room for you."

"I'm sorry. I, uh..."

"Oh, it's okay. You can stay here if you like. We have room." And then she proceeded to lead him into the A-frame.

Sharon was an attractive woman. Not a beauty by any means, but attractive in a good, solid, rural-American way. She looked just like the All-American farm girl all grown up, and as it turned out, that was exactly what she was. She was a country girl, born and raised on a farm in Wisconsin.

Inside the A-frame there was a young guy sitting on one of the numerous beds reading a book, a young guy from New York with dark curly hair and a neatly trimmed beard who she introduced as Bob. She said that he had just arrived on the farm the day before and that he could show Greg around while she went back out to finish her work in the field. And before she left, she also told him that the rest of the people who lived there were gone for the day, that they'd all gone into Selma to run a few errands.

Bob was very friendly and open, and it wasn't long before Greg began to feel like they were already intimate friends. He was kind and gentle almost to the point of seeming effeminate, and he gladly answered all of Greg's questions as the two of them walked around the farm. And Greg asked him a lot of questions, too, questions about the people and the life at the place. But he didn't ask anything about farming since it was obvious that Bob knew absolutely nothing about it.

Bob told him that there were two other people staying in the A-frame besides the two of them: a Vietnam veteran by the name of Lonnie and an Episcopal nun named Emily. And he said that the black girls out in the field didn't live there at all. They were from neighboring farms, and they were just there for the day to help out with the work and to receive a bit of instruction on nursing from Sharon. And he went on to explain the interest in nursing by saying that at that moment, the farm had a big project in the works, a project to build a medical clinic for the people of the area. He said that the clinic was needed because of the fact that the nearest medical facilities were all the way in Selma, some twenty miles away. And also because of the fact that even when a sick person from the area managed to get there, they were still subjected to a separate-but-unequal treatment where white patients always took preference. In fact, he'd even heard that they still had racially segregated waiting rooms. It seemed that change came very hard for Selma.

In the interests of building the clinic, the people at the farm had been making contacts and looking around for help with the project. And when they had approached the local branch of the VVAW—the Vietnam Veterans Against the War—they had found them to be very willing to cooperate. The war was winding to a close at that point, so the veterans were looking for other causes and other projects to which to dedicate themselves, and the clinic had seemed like just the ticket. They had agreed to raise funds and to procure building materials, and then once everything was ready to go, they promised that they would come in and help with the actual building of the structure. And in the meantime, they had sent Lonnie out to live on the farm, Lonnie who'd been a combat medic in Vietnam and who was there to help with the training of the local people who would eventually staff the clinic.

When all that explanation was out of the way, Greg asked Bob who else lived on the farm besides the four of them who were staying in the A-frame. Who exactly lived in the main house? Bob answered that the only people living there were Sharon and her husband Ray and their kids, because in many ways Liberation Farm was really Sharon and Ray, the last two of the original founders of the place who were still there and the only two permanent residents. But then when Greg asked him what Ray was like, Bob just kind of laughed. He didn't seem to know how to answer that question, and finally he said something like, "You'll see when you meet him."

Later on that afternoon, the group from Selma returned to the farm driving the only car there besides Greg's old pickup. And as Ray and the kids went into the main house, Lonnie and Emily came over to the A-frame. Lonnie was a wild man, Greg could see that as soon as he met him. He had that look in his eye, that back-from-the-war craziness. And though he'd been back long enough to have grown his hair out long, it was obvious that he hadn't been back nearly long enough to have healed the emotional scars he'd suffered. He still seemed to carry the war around with him all the time. It still disturbed his sleep at night, and it gave him his don't-give-a-shit, party-for-all-you've-got attitude toward life.

Lonnie took an instant liking to Greg as he seemed to read him as being the only other person on the farm who might really know how to party, and one of the first things he asked was whether or not Greg had any dope. And when Greg said no, he asked if maybe they could go somewhere in the pickup truck sometime, because he knew a place where they could always score. To that question, Greg said sure. They could go there anytime he wanted.

With Emily, the reaction was exactly the opposite as she seemed to take an instant disliking to Greg, and her reason for doing so wasn't a bit clear to him. He didn't know if she disliked his looks, or if she saw him as a bad influence on Lonnie, or even if she saw him as a rival for Lonnie's affections. But whatever the case, she quickly gave him the cold shoulder.

The group of them sat and talked and got acquainted, or at least Greg and Lonnie got acquainted while Bob mostly listened. And as for Emily, she soon announced that she was going to go help prepare supper and then left the three of them alone. And so they sat and talked, and they told each other about their pasts, about the places they'd been and the things they'd done, and they also told about their attitudes and their likes and their dislikes.

After a time, they wandered over to the main house to eat supper, and upon entering, Greg finally got a chance to meet Ray. And as soon as he saw him up close, as soon as he was introduced and shook hands with him, he said to himself, wow, this guy's impressive. Because that was the one word that immediately came to mind, the one word that seemed to describe Ray. He was impressive. Big and strong and striking to look at, a truly impressive specimen of black manhood. And while he wasn't handsome by any stretch of that word, still he was a man who would stand out in any crowd. A man whose strength and self-assurance and even charisma made him appear to be much better looking than he probably really was.

But this first impression was all that Greg got of him at the time, as he was soon told to take a seat at the big, long wooden table that dominated the kitchen. The girls from the neighboring farms were still there for supper. In fact, it was they who had prepared the meal, and with a group of teenage girls like that present—with them talking and laughing and joking—it was hard for anyone else to get a word in. So the rest of them were mostly silent, with only Sharon and occasionally Ray joining in on their jokes, and with Lonnie spending much of his time trying to flirt with one or two of them.

When the meal was over, the girls left and the rest of them retired to the living room. All of them except Ray, that is, as with this being his day to wash the dishes, he stayed out in the kitchen to perform the chore. They made themselves comfortable in the living room, sitting around on the well-worn sofas and chairs that lined the walls while the kids went off to play in

their room. Greg was soon to learn that this was the room, and this was the time of day, when the people at the farm would hold their serious discussions. And right now they were ready for their evening session. But since there was nothing of any pressing importance for them to discuss on this particular evening, Sharon decided to start them off by turning to Greg and asking him where he was coming from.

“Well, I’m a seaman, and I’ve been on the road a lot. I just got off a ship in Texas.”

“No, I mean politically. Where are you coming from politically?”

“Oh, that? Well, uh... I guess I’d have to say that I’m an anarchist, though I’m not really involved with any group or anything like that.”

“An anarchist, huh?” and it didn’t seem to go over very well with her.

Greg went on to tell her about his brief involvement—and his rapid disillusionment—with the Yippies. And then he told her that he considered himself to be an activist who just hadn’t found his movement yet. He hadn’t found any group worth dedicating himself to, and he hoped that he might finally find his place here at the farm.

Sharon made a short critique of anarchism in reply, coming out with a few phrases like “petit-bourgeois individualism” and the like, and she soon made it clear that she herself was a Maoist—she and Ray. She believed in Marx, and she believed in Lenin, and she especially believed in Chairman Mao. And she expressed her hope that Greg would soon see the errors of his ways and become a Maoist himself.

After she’d finished with Greg, she asked Bob to reiterate the political position he’d given her the night before, and he was glad to oblige her. He told her that though he wasn’t a Marxist, he was a Dialectical-Materialist—whatever a title like that could mean. Next she got to Lonnie who said that he was a revolutionary and that was all. He didn’t need any other label. And finally Sharon came to Emily who—oh, it doesn’t really matter what Emily said since she would be leaving very soon and would play no further part in this story.

Ray came in at the very tail end of the discussion, and when he did so, he simply agreed with everything that Sharon said and added nothing of his own. He almost seemed awkward about entering the conversation in mid-stream, and especially about entering a conversation like this one that was so theoretical and so dominated by Sharon. He acted as though he had nothing of his own to add.

CHAPTER TWO

During the next day, while Greg and Bob were helping Ray perform various jobs and chores around the farm, Ray was anything but silent. During that day, the true Ray began to come out. He seemed completely at ease as they moved around the farm, feeding the animals and cutting firewood and hauling manure. And throughout the day, he kept up a running conversation, a conversation that repeated the same pattern over and over again, as first he would ask either Greg or Bob about themselves and then, whatever answer he might get, he would use

it as a launching pad to launch into a whole series of stories and commentaries and anecdotes that related to that answer. And each and every one of the stories he came up with was interesting and funny and, most of all, was told with an enthusiasm that was almost contagious.

Whenever Greg said anything that related to ships or the sea, Ray would answer him with a series of stories from his days in the Navy many years before. And then when Bob mentioned that he'd once spent some time in a mental hospital, Ray was off and running on one of his very favorite subjects: the subject of nuthouses.

"They didn't shock you while you was there, did they?"

"No..."

"I didn't think so. Cause you don't got that look in the eye, know what I mean?"

Bob sort of shrugged, and then he asked the next logical question, "Did you get shocked?"

"Hell, no. I always made sure I got cured before that. I wasn't crazy enough to let em go doin' that to me."

"But you've been in a mental hospital?"

"Have I been in the nuthouse? Damn right I have. I've been in lots of nuthouses. I've been in nuthouses all over the country. Cause I'm a nut, you see. I'm a certified nut. I'm a card-carrying paranoid-schizophrenic, and I've got the card to prove it. I've got it right here."

And then after pulling out his wallet and showing the two of them his card, Ray launched right into his stories. He told about being in prison and about faking mental illness as a way of getting out of the hard labor, and he told about some of his prison buddies who did the same thing. He explained how they fooled everybody into thinking they were sick, and he gave all the colorful details of exactly how they did it. And of course he also told about how they faked their recovery, since that was the key to the whole thing.

"And these shrinks, they didn't know what was wrong with you in the first place. But now they see you're better all of a sudden and they think, 'Wow, I guess I musta cured him,' and they feel good about themselves. They say, 'Okay, you can go ahead and leave. You're all cured.'"

He told story after story about his youth and his many crimes back in D. C., and about his later crimes in other towns and cities all over the country. And he mentioned so many different prisons and prison farms and so many different mental hospitals, and he gave so many details about each and every one of them, that it became clear to Greg that Ray had spent a lot of time behind bars. And at the same time as he found the stories to be highly entertaining, he couldn't help but wonder just how many of the symptoms that Ray mentioned had really been faked and how many of them had been real. Because Ray didn't exactly fit the model of the well-adjusted American citizen. Ray was different. Ray was an original.

Later on that day, Bob happened to mention that he'd visited a well-known commune some time back, a commune that was based on some sort of far out psychological or sociological theory. Ray had been there too, of course, and he had his usual humorous comments to offer about the place.

"In that place, no one's supposed to talk to anybody unless they leave a message first. It's really weird. Like if you wanta borrow a hammer, you gotta leave a note, and maybe you gotta wait a week before he gives it to you. Or maybe he leaves you a note sayin' no, go borrow it from someone else. You can't just go up to him and ask him for it."

Then once Ray had disposed of that place, he went on to talk about some of the other communes he'd visited. And he'd visited a lot of them as it turned out. And finally he closed out the subject with one of his favorite catch-phrases, a phrase that Greg was to hear many times during his stay at the farm. "A commune ain't nothin' but a minimum security nuthouse for a bunch of middle-class white kids."

* * * * *

That second evening at the farm, Lonnie began to set what was to be an ongoing pattern as he approached Greg and asked him if he wanted to go somewhere that night. He said he knew some people around the area who liked to party, and he said that Greg would be welcome to come along. Greg and his pickup truck. So they got into the truck and hit the road, and they went to visit people at several different shacks scattered around the area. But at each place they went, they were told either that the guy they were looking for wasn't there or that he didn't have any dope on hand. And finally Lonnie directed Greg to drive to what he called the local liquor store.

The place was actually not much more than a shack itself, a small, broken-down place made out of unpainted wood where they sold beer and cheap wine along with a few other items. And after buying a bottle of wine, Lonnie and Greg sat on one of the logs outside the place and passed it back and forth. They also talked to the other people hanging around, especially to the winos. And during the whole time they were at the store, they were the only white people to be seen.

This situation of being surrounded by blacks was new to Greg, but Lonnie seemed to find it all perfectly natural. And that attitude of his seemed to confirm something that he often said about himself: that he was more black than white no matter what the color of his skin might be. He said he'd grown up in a slum in Milwaukee where he'd been surrounded by black people, and he'd come to identify with them so strongly that he'd developed into what could be called the opposite of an Oreo. He was white on the outside but black on the inside.

* * * * *

One day when Greg saw that there was a problem with the back doorknob, he went inside to report it to Sharon. But after she'd listened to what he had to say, the only reply she gave him was, "Well, deal with it."

Deal with it? Just like that? Him?... Well, why not? He could do it. He knew how to fix the knob. It had just never occurred to him to do it himself without running to Ray or Sharon first, without getting their permission or something.

* * * * *

A few days after Greg's arrival, it was announced that they would be holding a session of "Political Education" that evening after supper. So after all of them had pitched in together to get the dishes done quickly, the group assembled in the living room where they took their seats and prepared to be educated. It had been Sharon's idea to hold the session, and no sooner had they been seated than she pulled out a copy of Chairman Mao's little red book and announced that today they would be studying the chapter entitled "Combat Liberalism."

She followed this announcement with a few comments of her own about the dangers of liberalism and compromise, and she said that a revolutionary should always push things right through to their ultimate consequences. And next she opened the book and began to read. She read the first of Mao's statements on the subject and then paused for comments or discussion, but as there was almost no response, she continued to read. She read a few more passages, each of which met with the same tepid response, until she came to one that made reference to revolutionary leaders being bought off by the establishment. And no sooner had she finished reading that quotation than suddenly Ray was off and running with the subject.

He told about a visit he'd made to Washington, D. C., recently, and he talked about his old friends from the movement who now held comfortable, high-paying jobs with the government. He told about going into one of the most expensive restaurants in the whole city, a restaurant where lots of the old movement heavies liked to hang around and eat and drink. And he told about how he walked in with his beat-up old coveralls on and how he greeted them.

"They're all sittin' there in their expensive suits, and they're lookin' at me. And they say, 'Hi Ray, how ya doin'?' And I say 'Strugglin'.' That's all I say. That's all I ever say, just strugglin', cause that's what I'm still doin'. And I go up to em and I say, 'Hey, let me try that drink, man,' and I'm tastin' their cocktails, and I'm grabbin' food off their plates. And they're askin' me what I've been doin', and I say, 'Strugglin'.' And they're lookin' at me like why don't you go away, but they don't say nothin'. It's like they're scared to.

"But I ain't goin' away so easy, and I want em to see what someone looks like who's still in the struggle. So I walk around to the different tables, and I try all the drinks. And then I start hittin' em up for money. I say, 'Hey man, gimme a quarter.' And they're lookin' at me real funny, cause they can pay a hundred bucks for a meal, but they can't spare a quarter for a brother who's still strugglin'."

He went on and on like that until finally he noticed the way that Sharon was looking at him, like it was enough already, at which point he cut off his stories and told her to go ahead and read some more. She read a few more quotations, but it wasn't long before Ray was back in gear telling another series of stories about the old days and about the movement and about all the people who had sold out. And he went on and on before finally taking another break and letting

Sharon get back to reading from the book—before letting her resume her session only to interrupt her once again a short time later with more of his stories.

When the evening ended, they still hadn't covered more than two or three pages of Mao's little red book. But at least as far as Greg was concerned, that was no great loss. He didn't mind the constant interruptions at all because he loved Ray's stories. They were so interesting and so entertaining, much more so than anything Chairman Mao ever wrote.

CHAPTER THREE or FOUR

Many people came and went during the time Greg was at Liberation Farm. Blacks and whites, liberals and radicals and revolutionaries, most of whom stayed there for no more than two or three days. But about a week after his arrival, there came a couple who were different, a couple who came there to stay, a mixed race couple by the names of Jan and Richard.

Jan was a very average-American-looking white woman a few years older than Sharon, and she was an old friend of Ray and Sharon's who had stayed at the farm a number of times over the last few years. She'd been a freedom rider back in the heyday of the civil rights movement, and she knew Ray from back in those days, back when he was one of the leaders of the radical wing of the SNCC. Her acquaintanceship with Sharon was more recent, though, since Sharon had been an ardent Republican back in the early sixties and had even worked as a volunteer for Goldwater in 1964 before taking a swing far over to the left in the following years.

Jan had been there and seen it all, and she loved to tell stories about the old movement days, about the life they led and the battles they fought, and also about some of the personalities from those days. And some of her favorite stories involved Ray and the way he was back then. Back in his glory days. Because she had seen him then and she knew.

"Oh, and the rap sessions they used to have. It was incredible. Because you listen to Ray now and you hear the way he goes on. But those other guys were just as good at it, too, like especially Stokely and Rap Brown. And when all three of them got together, it was amazing. The way they played off each other and fed each other. It was like music. It was like an art, and it seemed like they could just go on forever."

Jan claimed to be a good revolutionary, and she could quote Chairman Mao scripture and verse just like the best of them. But still when you got right down to it, there was something about her, something deep inside, that prevented her from ever being anything more than a hopeless liberal. And while she wanted a revolution, she also cared way too much about people to want to bring it about in a way that would get anyone hurt. She wanted to work with people and convince them rather than fighting them. And in her attempts to work with them, she always tried to understand them and to take their points of view into consideration. Her deep-seated liberalism even came out in her choice of professions, that of social worker, and it could also be read between the lines of the stories she told about her more recent experiences in Berkeley during the People's Park riots. Because while she'd been at the riots, she hadn't been there as a protester or a radical. She hadn't been there to overthrow the government or to liberate the park. She'd been there as a medic to help those who'd been injured in the disturbances. And even her

latest job, the one she'd just left, had been a model of liberalism, too, as she'd been working in a VA mental hospital trying to help mentally and emotionally damaged veterans.

It had been through this job that she'd met Richard, a handsome young black veteran who was very deeply disturbed, one who had only a rather tenuous connection with what most people call reality. He was like a guy on a permanent acid trip, seeming not to truly comprehend much of what was going on around him and only participating in things in a marginal way. He was far from being a dangerous mental case, though. He was calm and quiet, very kind and very gentle, and he always had a spaced-out smile for everyone and everything around him.

And with his arrival, he seemed to be fulfilling Ray's old line about a commune being a minimum security nuthouse, though in this instance it was for a black kid rather than a white one. But in any case, he did what he could to contribute to the farm, and he always did the jobs that were assigned to him even if he did them in very slow and inefficient ways. Like with the way he would wash the dishes on the days when it was his turn to do so. He would spend all day doing it, stopping to examine each and every plate as he went, turning it over slowly and carefully and studying it before moving on to the next one.

* * * * *

Bob was helping Greg and Lonnie dig fence-posts that day, helping them with the type of outdoor work—"man's work"—that he usually preferred to avoid. But he had to do it since on this day there was no "woman's work" for him to do. Ray came by several times, and whenever he was with them, he was in the mood to talk politics. Racial politics that is, since that was his favorite type of politics. Among the three of them working there, though, only Bob would take the bait. Lonnie would just agree with whatever Ray said, while Greg was still too busy absorbing everything and trying to sort it out to be able to offer an opinion of his own.

So it fell to Bob to do all the talking—to talk and to serve as Ray's foil. "I don't know why you're always criticizing these white kids who join the movement."

"Who, me?" Ray seemed genuinely surprised at the accusation.

"Yeah, you always run them down because of their middle-class background and their white skin when you should be welcoming them into the movement. Because when some middle-class white kid drops acid and sees the light, and he sees how much injustice there is all around him, and he comes over to the revolution, that's when you should say, 'We're glad to have you on our side,' instead of running him down."

"I do say I'm glad to have em. I'm always glad to see more people joining the revolution. But you see, the problem with so many of these white kids is that they don't wanta just join the revolution. They wanta join it as the leaders. They wanta tell everyone else what to do and how to fight, including people who've been in the struggle their whole lives. So what I say is that if they drop acid and they see the light, then they're welcome to join us. We need em. We need all of em that we can get, but they're not gonna be the leaders. They're not gonna just come walkin' in here and tell us how to fight this fight after we've already been in it for all these years."

"But not all of them are like that, are they?"

“Too many are, way too many that I’ve met. They just joined the revolution yesterday, but they think they already know everything there is to know about it. And they don’t. They don’t know anything.”

“Well, maybe some of them...”

“And I don’t think they really care all that much about what happens in the long run, either. They’re just out to do their thing and have some fun, and if things fall apart, if it all goes to shit, they’ve still got their credit card they can fall back on.”

“Their credit card? What credit card are you talking about?”

“Their white skin, that’s their credit card. Because if things go bad with the revolution, they can always cut their hair and shave their beards and put on a suit, and they’re right back in the establishment. But me, I can’t change this skin of mine. I’m black, and I’m always gonna be black, and I’m never gonna be welcome in the establishment unless they need some token negro or somethin’. And that’s why I don’t trust em as leaders, cause they can always run out and use their credit cards and leave the rest of us hangin’. The rest of us who don’t have that white skin.”

The two of them went on like that for some time, and Greg found the discussion very stimulating because they were bringing up ideas that he really hadn’t heard or thought about up until that moment. After awhile, Bob made a reference to “our people coming over here to America searching for freedom,” and immediately Ray was all over him.

“No, there’s a big difference there. There’s a real big difference between your people and mine, because your people came over searching for freedom, just like you say, but my people were brought here. My people were slaves, and they were brought over here to work. There was never any freedom over here for them.” And with those words, Ray summed up the one great, unbridgeable chasm that will always separate blacks from whites in the United States, the one historic wound that will never heal.

NEXT CHAPTER?

Greg awoke to Lonnie’s urgent whisper, “Get up. Get up! Everyone up. We got trouble!” And as he sat up, he heard voices somewhere off in the distance, voices of people yelling, although he couldn’t make out what it was that they were saying. He threw on his pants as fast as he could and slipped on his shoes, and then he dashed out the door just behind Lonnie who led the way with rifle in hand.

Up until this moment, Greg had doubted the necessity of some of the precautions they always took at the farm. He’d felt that they were a bit overdone, like the way that Ray always warned people against standing in front of windows after dark just in case there might be a sniper in the area, or the way that Lonnie always kept a rifle by his bed. But now all at once, Greg saw that there were very good reasons for all the precautions. As he ran, his mind called up the other precautions and instructions he’d been given, and it especially called up the instructions about what to do in a situation like this: to run out into the field behind the A-frame and hide there in the darkness.

He felt wide awake as he ran, alert and deeply calm, and out of the corner of his eye, he caught glimpses of a car parked out on the road. He ran what seemed like a reasonable distance away from the building, and then he squatted down in the field and looked over toward the car to see what exactly was going on. But there was nothing to see by the car. It was just sitting there a little way up the road. As he looked around nearer by, though, he saw some people standing just inside the entrance to the driveway and a little to one side of the street light that Ray had had installed out there. They were standing in a group, and they were yelling insults and obscenities in the direction of the house. Greg couldn't make them out very well from where he was, but it looked like there were three of them—or make that four—all of them male and all of them young from what he could see, all of them very young.

They continued to yell for another couple of minutes when suddenly Ray appeared out of nowhere, charging forward with his rifle pointed right at them. And as he approached, he yelled out, "Hold it right there! Get your hands up!" They started to turn in the direction of the car as though they meant to flee, but before they'd even taken a step, Lonnie also appeared, Lonnie and his gun coming up from behind and cutting off their route of escape.

Greg was quickly up on his feet and running toward the action. He didn't want to miss a thing that would happen. And as he approached, he could hear Ray questioning them in a gruff, authoritative voice. He was asking then what their names were and where they came from and other questions along those lines. The group of them looked even younger from up close than they had from a distance. They looked like kids. They looked like high schoolers, and they also looked like they'd been drinking as a couple of them were pretty unsteady on their feet. But more than anything else at that moment, they looked very sheepish, like they felt awfully foolish, and one of them even tried to apologize by saying that it was nothing but a joke. His apologies were wasted on Ray, though, who took this sort of thing very seriously.

Those poor kids, they must have believed all the stories they'd heard about the farm, about it being filled with a bunch of wimpy flower children who they could intimidate and harass at will. So just imagine their surprise now as they found themselves confronted by a group of guys with guns. And to make matters even worse, one of those guys was a big, strong, tough-looking black man, a man who probably would have scared them even without the gun.

But while the kids looked cowed and humiliated, they didn't look scared, or at least not until Elijah arrived on the scene a short time after Greg. Elijah was one of Lonnie's party buddies who was crashing at the farm that night. He was a young guy from a share-cropper family that lived a few miles away, and as he looked at those young white kids—at those young rednecks—all his years of frustration came boiling to the surface. All those generations of frustration came spilling out.

"Let's kill em. Let's kill these motherfuckers," he yelled as he got close. And the kids' eyes went wide when they saw him, almost naked and his hair flying about wildly and with a crazy, homicidal look in his eyes. "Gimme a gun quick. I'm gonna kill em all."

His buddy Lonnie said what he could to calm him down, but Elijah just kept yelling it over and over again, and finally Ray had to step in. "Now come on, Elijah. You know you can't

go doin' stuff like that." He paused a moment to eye the kids, and then he added, "I mean, sure, we can bury the bodies no problem. But what're we gonna do with the car?"

The kids really looked scared now. Even the alcohol they'd drunk wasn't enough to keep up their courage in a situation like this. But then just before they crumbled completely, before they fell to their knees and begged for their lives, Jan arrived on the scene and the entire atmosphere changed. Because Jan wanted to talk to them. She wanted to reason with them. She wanted to understand them.

"Why did you do it? Don't you know that we're people just like you? Why do you hate us? What did we ever do to you?" And so on. And as her questioning went on, as she began to develop a dialogue with them, the air of menace and intimidation subsided. Elijah still acted wild and angry for some time, but as he was restrained by Lonnie and Greg, he couldn't actually do them any physical harm. All he could do was make threats, and with time even he began to cool off little by little.

Finally Sharon arrived on the scene, carrying a rifle and accompanied by the kids, and she soon took charge of the situation. She made each guy show his driver's license, and she wrote down the names, and then she told them to get out of there and never show their faces around there again. And with that they scrambled out of there as fast as they could, piling into the car and taking off in a cloud of dust.

No one felt like sleeping at that moment, so they gathered in the living room to talk things over. That is, all of them except Sharon who went to put the kids to bed and who stayed with them to calm them down until they went back to sleep. Ray was all wound up over the events that had just occurred, and since there was no competing with him when he was in a mood like that, he was the one who did most of the talking that evening.

He told the stories of old incidents and confrontations that he'd been involved in over the years, some of them dating back to civil rights movement days and some of them more recent. And he told about every single incident that had occurred since they'd been living at the farm, every confrontation with individuals or groups, and every large-scale invasion by the Klan that had taken place. And as he gave the details of each of those incidents, he kept saying over and over again that this one was nothing. This one hardly even rated as an incident because they'd already had so many that had been so much worse.

As he talked, he complimented Elijah a number of times. He said that he'd really put the fear into those dumb-ass rednecks. He said that they'd never forget that crazy nigger, and he said they'd be peeing their pants for the next week at least.

He also addressed a few remarks to the white guys present, remarks like, "Now we'll see what these white kids can do. We'll see if they run or if they stick it out. We'll see if they can stand up in the real struggle." These remarks didn't seem to be directed at Lonnie, though, since Lonnie had already stood up and carried his load in the incident, and Ray even made a few comments about him not really being all that white anyway, a reference to his often-stated internal blackness. At the same time, Ray didn't show much interest in Bob, as he already seemed to have dismissed him as a wimp from whom he couldn't expect very much. But instead,

his remarks seemed to be aimed almost exclusively at Greg. He was wondering about Greg. He still hadn't figured him out, and he didn't know if he would ever measure up or not, if he would ever turn out to be a good, dedicated revolutionary. Because this was the first test he'd seen Greg go through. This was the first chance he'd had to look for hints of just how he would react when the shit really hit the fan.

After the session broke up and they were on their way back to the A-frame, Lonnie asked Greg if he'd like to go somewhere and have something to drink and maybe get stoned. Greg said it was too late, that everything would be closed, but Lonnie said that Elijah knew some places they could go. He said there were lots of places around, and he said that he wasn't ready to go back to bed yet. He said he had to unwind some more first.

Greg wasn't up to it at all, though. He wanted to get some sleep since it would be morning soon, but Lonnie was insistent, and Elijah said that he was ready to go party, too. So finally Greg gave in, or at least he partially gave in, as he gave the keys to his pickup to Lonnie and told him to go ahead and take it. Just try not to wreck it, that was all.

ANOTHER CHAPTER

As Greg rode into Selma with Ray that day, Ray was feeling talkative, a condition that wasn't all that uncommon for him. And on this day, the thing he felt like talking about was the old days, the days of the struggle for civil rights. And judging from the way he talked about it, it was as though he was trying to impress upon Greg just how serious the struggle was—how serious and how dangerous. Because as he dwelled upon the violence and the dangers of the early struggle, he kept implying that those dangers were still present in the current struggle.

So in effect, the trip became something of a guided tour of the road between the farm and Selma, with Ray pointing out spots along the way and describing the incidents and confrontations that took place at each of them. And he got particularly worked up when they reached one particular spot, a spot in which a civil rights worker was murdered. As he pointed it out, he gave not only the person's name but also the exact date and time of the killing along with all the details. And then immediately afterwards, he went on to list others who died in the struggle, giving their names and the dates and locations of their deaths and explaining exactly how each and every one of them was killed. And when he talked about them, he did so with true feeling in his voice, because these were people who had been his friends. His friends and his comrades in the struggle.

When they reached Selma, they came to the Edmund Pettus Bridge, and of course when they did so, Ray gave his own version of the famous confrontation that took place there back in the days. And he told the story in the same way that he always told stories: full of drama and tragedy, and full of colorful details. In fact, from the way he told it, it sounded like one of the great epic battles of history, and it left Greg wondering just how many people actually died there that day. Because from the sounds of it, there must have been piles of dead bodies all around, what with the way that the police attacked the unarmed demonstrators and threw people off the bridge and all the rest of it. But though Greg suspected that Ray's story might be slightly exaggerated, one thing he could say in favor of it was that it was alive. It was vibrant. It was a

living, breathing history. And when Ray told the story, it didn't sound like history at all. It sounded like something that just happened yesterday.

After they'd parked in town and were walking down the street, they came to a hardware store, and as they were passing it, Ray stopped to examine the stock of garden tools just inside the door. Then after looking them over for a minute, he picked up one particular hoe and said to Greg, "This is it. This is the type they gave me in that prison farm. A brand new one just like this. They took it and they handed it to me and the only thing they said was, 'Wear it out.' Just like that, just wear it out. And I tell ya, that's exactly what I did. I wore that thing out. I wore it right down to nothin'."

A short distance up the street was the Marine Corps recruiting office where Ray decided to have himself a little fun and maybe to show-off a little bit. So when they got there, he stuck his head inside and said, "Hi, Sarge, how's it goin'?"

"Oh, fine, thanks."

"It sure must be gettin' hard to fool them kids into joinin' nowadays, ain't it? Must be tough on you." And then without waiting for an answer, he was back out the door and back on his way.

They split up when they reached the bank that Greg wanted to visit, with Greg going inside by himself and Ray continuing on his way to take care of a few errands of his own. Greg talked to them in the bank, first to the cashier and then to the manager, and he showed them the paycheck that he wanted to cash, a check from a Texas company and drawn on a Texas bank. As he did so, he fully expected to be told that he'd have to wait a week or two for the check to clear. That was standard procedure at any bank he'd ever dealt with. But to his surprise, when the manager's answer came, it was not only in the affirmative, but he was even told that he could have the money right away. Because in true southern style, the guy had sized him up and decided that he was honest, and so he'd agreed to let him have the money on trust, which was something that Greg had never expected. He'd never expected it and, in fact, he'd never even asked for it.

Then just after Greg had been handed the money, Ray came walking in and went right up to Greg. And when the manager saw him, his eyes popped out in such an expression of alarm, an expression like, "Are you with this guy? Gimme my money back!" But he never actually said a word, and he never cancelled the transaction. He let Greg keep the money. He continued to trust the hippie even though he hung out with blacks, and especially radical blacks like Ray. And of course his trust was never betrayed since the check was a good one.

They stopped at a gas station on the way out of town, and when Ray came out and got back into the car, he said to Greg, "You know what that guy workin' here just said? He said you look just like Jesus Christ sittin' out here in the car. And you know what I said? I said, 'Yeah, but you better watch it, cause one of these days Jesus Christ is gonna blow you away.' That's what I told him."

As they drove back to the farm, Ray still felt like talking. But now as he talked, he wasn't just telling stories. Now he was beginning to wax philosophical. Now it was almost like he was

trying to teach something to Greg, or even to initiate him into the mysteries of the struggle, into the mysteries of the revolution.

“You know, people talk about givin’ us our rights, about the government makin’ some law that gives us our rights and all that type of bullshit. But the truth is that rights aren’t given, they’re taken. And that’s exactly what we did back in those days. We went out and we took our rights. Wasn’t nobody give em to us.

“But you know the real truth in this country? The real truth is that most people don’t take their rights, either. What most people do is they buy their rights. Cause rights are for sale same as everything else in this country. And the more money you got, the more rights you got. But us in the movement, we didn’t have no money. So the only thing we could do was to take em, cause that was the only way we were gonna get em. And when they finally passed their laws, they weren’t givin’ us nothin’. They were just recognizin’ what we already took on our own.”

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From time to time, they would hold “criticism/self-criticism” sessions at the farm, sessions that were supposed to be modeled on the ones held in China. But somehow they weren’t quite the same, because for one thing, no one at the farm would ever admit to any self-criticism. And so the sessions were really just criticism sessions with people attacking each other and people defending themselves, and with no one ever admitting to any mistakes. And while the sessions that were called simply because it had been a week or so since they’d held one could be little more than mild or even pleasant get-togethers, those that were called because someone had a grievance that they wanted to air could become very heated indeed.

The main target at the criticism/self-criticism sessions was usually Lonnie, and this was especially true in the more heated ones. His main accuser was almost always Sharon who would attack him for his irresponsibility and for the disruptions he caused with his running around at night and his staying out late and his getting up late and all the rest of it. But rather than these sessions curing him or doing anything to make him change his ways, it seemed like the more he was attacked, the worse his behavior became. It had reached the point where he was bugging Greg to go out with him almost every night, and then whenever Greg would say no, which was most of the time by now, Lonnie would bug him to let him borrow the pickup. He was getting bored. He was getting stir-crazy. And it was becoming very clear that he just had to get out of there. And to make matters worse, he took up with a young, underage girl from the area, one of the teenage girls who had been at the farm on the day when Greg first arrived.

As word got out about his playing around with her, it caused a real scandal, a scandal not only there at the farm, but also a scandal among the people on neighboring farms. So one day, Sharon called a criticism/self-criticism session to deal with the situation. And as always at these sessions that dealt with Lonnie, she was backed up by Ray and also by Jan. Though of course in the case of Jan, she tempered her criticisms of Lonnie with efforts to understand him, with questions about why he did the things he did and what it was that he was trying to accomplish and so on.

Sharon went after him and told him that what he was doing was damaging the entire commune by hurting relations with the community, and Ray agreed with her on that. She said that they had to put the commune—and the struggle—above themselves as individuals, that they couldn't go giving in to their desires and their lusts when those things hurt the commune as a whole. She said that he had to stop what he was doing. He had to rein it in and start showing some responsibility.

Everyone expected Lonnie to come out swinging at the accusation, but on that night he'd finally had enough and there was an air of almost total resignation in the way he responded. He didn't argue with them, and he didn't even try to defend himself. He just listened to what they had to say, and then finally he said that he would be leaving the next day. He couldn't take it anymore. He had to get out of there. And no sooner had he said it than Sharon, Ray and Jan completely changed course and began trying to talk him out of it, trying to talk him into staying, but he said no. His mind was made up and that was it. He was going and there was nothing they could say that would ever make him change his mind.

The next morning when Greg gave him a ride to the bus station in Selma, he looked so much calmer than Greg had ever seen him. He looked like a weight had been removed from him. And as they shook hands and said goodbye, Greg could tell by the look of relief in Lonnie's face that he had made the right decision. Leaving was the best thing that Lonnie could do. Leaving was the only way he'd ever be able to regain his sanity.

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It wasn't long after Lonnie's departure that Greg announced his own plans to go. He really didn't know why he was leaving at that time, though, since he had no great desire to go, and since by now it was clear that he was welcome to stay there as long as he wanted. It wasn't like they were asking him to leave or anything like that. But he just had the feeling that it was time to go. It was like something was calling him, like the open road was calling. It was like his drifter's schedule was telling him that he'd been in one place long enough and it was time for him to get out of there. And there's no arguing and no reasoning with a drifter once he decides that it's time to leave, because as soon as he makes that decision, he's already as good as gone.

So he was out in the A-frame packing up his few belongings and getting ready to leave. Jan had already tried to convince him to stay, saying that they needed his carpentry and other skills around the farm. And Sharon had reminded him that he didn't have to leave if he didn't want to, that he was welcome to stay as long as he wanted, while Bob and Richard had each simply said goodbye and good luck. But as for Ray, he hadn't said a word one way or the other. He'd just stood there and looked at him like he was studying him and sizing him up, just looked at him and said nothing.

Now as Greg was packing, Ray walked into the A-frame and immediately resumed his former posture. He stood there and looked at Greg, and he didn't say a word. But then after several minutes of this, he finally spoke up in a flat, expressionless tone, "Why don't you stay?" Just that and nothing more.

But somehow those words had more meaning to Greg. They had much more meaning to him, because not only did they mean that Ray was inviting him to stay on the farm, but they also meant that he was inviting him to stay with the revolution. They meant that he accepted Greg as a valid part of that revolution, that he accepted him as a friend and as a brother in the struggle. They meant that he accepted him as a man.

So after a short pause to consider Ray's words and their meaning, Greg finally gave his answer, "Yeah, okay."

STILL ANOTHER CHAPTER

Being an early riser and usually being the first one up in the morning, Greg had been gradually taking over more and more of the early morning chores as time went by. And now that he finally felt himself to be a full member of the commune, he took over every one of those chores. So now each morning, he would get up and get dressed while the others in the A-frame were still asleep, and he would go out and feed all the different animals and gather the eggs and milk the cow. And after that, he would head for the kitchen where he would help prepare breakfast as soon as the others began to get up.

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Whenever the soil and weather conditions were right, Ray would fire up the old tractor that they owned and use it to get out and plow the fields. And not only did he plow the fields of Liberation Farm, but he also did those of several of the neighbors, none of whom could afford a tractor of their own. And one day one of the neighbors returned the favor by bringing over his mule and plowing a field that was too small and had too poor drainage for Ray to use the tractor there.

On the first days that he was getting the tractor ready to go, Ray had spent a long time figuring out a way to attach a little portable radio to the thing. In the end he had succeeded, and so now each day as he drove the tractor out into the fields, he would have that radio cranked up full blast. And looking at him one day as he drove away, singing along to "Cisco Kid" at the top of his lungs, Sharon just shook her head in disbelief and said, "It really is true. You can take the boy out of the city, but you can't take the city out of the boy."

* * * * *

Richard approached Greg one day and told him, "I want to talk to you." And the way he said it, it sounded so important that naturally Greg agreed to the talk. He followed Richard into the A-frame where they went over to a couple of beds that sat a few feet apart, and there they sat down and faced each other.

Greg tried a couple of conversation starters like, "How's it going," and then he waited for Richard to say whatever it was that he had on his mind. But Richard didn't say a thing. He just sat there and looked at Greg. He looked into his eyes, and he looked at his face, and he looked him up and down, and then he smiled and nodded his head and muttered, "Yeah," almost under his breath. Greg tried one last time to start a normal conversation by asking Richard what it was

that he wanted, but Richard just kept doing the same thing over and over again. He kept looking Greg over and nodding his head and saying, “Yeah.”

Seeing that Richard didn’t want a verbal conversation. Seeing that what he really wanted was some sort of silent communication, Greg soon gave up on talking, and instead he just sat there patiently, looking back at Richard and smiling. Richard seemed very happy with this arrangement, and he continued the “talk” for quite some time, occasionally muttering things to himself like, “Yeah, my big brother,” and similar phrases. And finally, their “talk” came to an end when Bob came into the A-frame.

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A couple of Ray’s old friends came by for a visit dressed in flowing African robes and talking about the Black Muslim movement of which they were now a part. But though they talked about it, they knew better than to try to convert Ray to their way of thinking, the same as Ray knew better than to try to convert them. And in any case, none of them really needed conversion since all of them were still in the struggle. They were just in it in somewhat different ways, that was all.

That afternoon as they sat around on the porch, they began to beat out a rhythm on their thighs, and it wasn’t long before Ray went into the house and came back out with a whole pile of pots and pans that they could use as drums. And soon they were all shifting into high gear, drumming away as hard as they could and improvising new rhythms as they went along before returning to the old ones and so on. It was infectious the way they were so totally getting into it, so infectious that Greg soon overcame his old white-men-have-no-rhythm complex and joined in. Why, it was so infectious that even Bob joined in, Bob who really and truly had no sense of rhythm.

And just when they were reaching their peak, just when they were becoming completely immersed in their rhythms, a car pulled up into the driveway and an elderly black man in a cheap suit got out. He started to walk up toward the house but then paused to look at the group on the porch. He looked down at the Jehovah’s Witnesses literature that he had in his hand and then back at the group, and back at the literature and back at the group, and then finally he just shook his head and got back into the car and drove off.

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There was something about what those two students from Harvard had said that day while the three of them were out shucking feed-corn, something that bothered Greg, something that was eating away at him. And it wasn’t because they’d made some profound statement or anything of that sort. In fact, all they’d done had been to ask a question. But as it turned out, it was exactly the question that Greg had been steadfastly refusing to ask himself right up until that very moment.

All they’d done had been to look around at the farm and at the pile of corn and then ask Greg, “Is this the revolution?” Greg had immediately come back with, “Yes, of course it is. This is the revolution. This is what it’s all about.” But though he’d said it with conviction, and though

he'd even believed it right at that moment, still the question had planted the seeds of doubt in his mind. And now as time had gone on, those seeds had begun to grow.

Was this the revolution, or was this just a farm? Were they really working toward the revolution, or were they just playing at it? Were they actually accomplishing anything, or were they just fooling themselves? Because what did they really have here besides a farm and a dream about building a free clinic? And was that dream about the clinic something real and solid, or was it just a pipe-dream? Would it ever actually happen? Would they ever actually build it and put it into operation? And even if they did succeed in building it, how would that serve as a basis for a revolution? How would that clinic—that clinic and this farm—ever do anything to overthrow the government or to promote the sort of profound social changes that America so desperately needed?

In fact, how was it possible to ever have a revolution in the United States? Who or what exactly did you have to overthrow? When you got right down to it, it was just like Ray had said one day: the hardest part in this society is identifying the enemy. The hardest part is figuring out who exactly “they” are. Because while people always talk about “they did this” and “they did that,” if you ever go out and look for this “they,” you just can’t find anyone. And maybe that’s because there is no “they” to find.

It’s the people who have to overthrow the government and change society. It’s the people who have to right the wrongs that exist. But at the same time, it’s those very same people who have created the society, those very same people who are feeding and perpetuating the wrongs. So how do you do it? Who do you attack, and what do you use as a weapon?

Like how do you fight the power of advertising, for instance? Advertising which is the most powerful and most insidious form of brainwashing that’s ever been invented. And the fact that nobody really controls this form of mind-control, the fact that there’s no master plan, is the very thing that’s made it so successful. The fact that the brainwashing is only a by-product of the drive to convince people to consume is the very thing that has made this form of brainwashing so impossible to resist. And while the people who are being brainwashed don’t realize it’s being done to them, at the same time the advertisers, the people who are doing the brainwashing, don’t even realize that they’re doing it. But the truth of the matter is that while those advertisers are busy spending huge amounts of time and energy in trying to sell their products, they’re also even more effectively selling their world view and their system of values to the public.

So how do you fight something like that? How do you make a revolution among people who are bombarded with this type of brainwashing day after day, hour after hour? And since advertising is only the tip of the iceberg, only one of a great many powerful obstacles to be overcome, just how do you go about changing this society? How do you bring about a revolution? By moving to a communal farm and building a free clinic? Is that how you do it?

A LATE CHAPTER

Since Lonnie’s departure, the criticism/self-criticism sessions had become very mild. There had been at least one exception, though, which was the session in which Bob had attacked Ray for his macho attitudes and his fag-baiting. He’d complained about the comments Ray was

always making about his lack of masculinity, and he'd criticized Ray's "plastic penis," as Bob called it. But on most nights, the sessions turned out to be more like the one in which Richard had taken center stage and explained to one and all the way he moved his body. The session in which he'd explained how he would just think a thought like, "move my hand," and the hand would move all by itself. Why, it was almost like the whole thing was magic.

On this particular night, however, the session was a heated one indeed, as heated as the ones they used to have back when Lonnie was still there if not more so. And on this night, the target of the criticism was Greg. Greg, the guy who never attacked and never defended, the guy who only listened at these sessions. On this night, he was the one in the hot seat.

It all had to do with the pair of kids who came by to visit the farm that afternoon, the pair of local teenagers who came by to see what the farm was really like. They said that they lived in the area and that their father was in the sheriff's department, and they said that they'd heard so many stories about Liberation Farm that they'd finally decided to come by and see the place for themselves. So they drove in and said hello, and eventually they ended up sitting around in the A-frame talking to Greg. And it was while the three of them were seated there that the kids pulled out a joint and lit it up and passed it around.

So this was the issue that was at stake at this criticism/self-criticism session, the issue of smoking dope on the farm. And on this day for once, it was Ray who led the attack rather than Sharon, because after all, it was Ray who walked in on the group of them and saw them smoking. And while he didn't say anything at the time, not while the kids were still there, now he was ready to unload on the subject. Now he had a whole lot to say.

"You know we don't allow no dope-smokin' around here, don't you? Especially not after all the trouble we just had with that Lonnie character. We don't want no more dope around this place, and you know it. So what were you doin'? What were you thinkin'?"

Now Greg could have responded to this by admitting his mistake and apologizing for it and saying he'd never let it happen again, and he even could have made an excuse about it being the kids who had lit up, not him. But as he felt that Ray was seriously overreacting to the incident right now, he decided to take a different tack. He decided to minimize the whole thing. "It was just one joint, that was all it was. It wasn't like we had some big pot-party goin' on."

But Ray was going to have none of this. "Just one joint? Is that what you say? You talk about it like it's no big thing, but I tell you what: it *is* a big thing. It's a very big thing. Cause you don't know who those kids are, and you don't know what they're up to. You don't know if they might be here settin' you up. You don't know if they might be settin' up the whole damn farm for a bust."

"Who, those kids?..."

"You don't know who they are. For all you know, they could be workin' for the pigs. And you won't know that till it's too late, till they come roarin' in here and bust your ass."

"Oh, come on..."

Ray kept insisting, though, insisting on the dangers that the kids could have posed not only to Greg but also to everyone else on the farm. And with time, his insistence began to grate on Greg's nerves. Greg had talked to those kids, and he knew that there was no danger from them. He knew that they weren't pigs, and now he thought that Ray was intentionally exaggerating the threat they might have posed as a way of justifying his and Sharon's recent decision to enforce a total prohibition of dope on the farm. Ray went on and on about the dangers, though, and when it finally reached the point where he just couldn't take it anymore, Greg began his counter-attack.

"When did we vote on that policy, anyway? I don't remember us ever voting on it. All I remember is you telling me."

"It's an old rule. It's one we agreed on a long time ago."

"Well, I didn't agree on it." He paused for a moment, and then he decided to up the ante even further. "So is that what you call freedom around here? You telling me what to do. Is that what you call liberation? Is that the liberation we have here on Liberation Farm?"

With this statement, the session took a major turn for the worse. Ray was totally outraged with Greg and his attack on the farm, and so was Sharon. Why, even Jan was offended. Even she found it hard to be sympathetic and understanding toward him after hearing that. Only Bob was still prepared to take Greg's side in the matter. But the only strategy he could think of using was to make excuses for the whole incident, excuses that no one present was interested in hearing, not even Greg, so his arguments were quickly brushed aside and ignored.

Greg didn't want to make excuses. What he really wanted to do was to push the issue. He wanted to push things as far as he could. He wanted to release the pressure and the frustrations that had been building up inside him ever since he'd been at the farm. And he especially wanted to release his political frustrations, because he wasn't a Maoist and he never would be, and he felt that it was time for him to begin defending his anarchist principles. And so whenever there was a pause in the attacks on him, he tried to do just that. He talked about the importance of freedom, the importance of maintaining the little, day-to-day freedoms while fighting for Freedom with a capital F, and he tried to explain the importance of living the revolution—the whole revolution—everyday. And though these points fell mainly on deaf ears, he next began an attack on government in general and especially on government-based solutions to social problems. "Anarchism may be impractical, and I may be a fool to believe in it, but I think that anyone who expects the government to solve more problems than it creates is even more impractical than me. Because government solutions to problems always make things worse, not better." And he went on to ask how anyone could actually believe that Marxism was the answer to our problems, or that Marxism would ever work in the United States when it was so obviously a failure everywhere else that it had ever been tried.

Ray was genuinely insulted by Greg's remarks about Marxism. He was hurt by them even, feeling almost like he'd been betrayed, like Greg had somehow turned traitor to the revolution. And his response was to attack him even more strongly than before. "We don't need no more hippies around here. We don't need no more of these white kids comin' here. We gotta get em outa here."

Now it was Greg's turn to feel insulted as Ray's lack of respect for him as a person stung him very deeply. How could Ray talk about him like that? Like he was just some spoiled little white kid. Didn't Ray know him by now? Didn't he know that he was sincere and committed? How could he say those things?

But instead of asking those questions out loud, Greg reacted by raising the pitch even higher. And soon he was insulting the farm itself, running down its accomplishments and even its goals and making fun of it as a vehicle for revolution. Ray was on his feet by now, standing with his fists clenched and trying to intimidate Greg into backing down, but Greg refused to be intimidated. He stood up, too, ready to take on Ray if he started anything. He knew that Ray would probably beat him in a fight, but that really didn't matter to him at the moment, because he wouldn't let this guy push him around, and he'd fight him if he had to.

At this point, Jan finally resumed her peacemaker role, and Sharon backed her up. They said that things had gone far enough by now and it was time to call an end to the session. It was time for Ray and Greg to get away from each other before things got even worse.

* * * * *

The next evening, Greg presented a written apology to everyone at the farm. It was the only act of self-criticism that ever took place during his stay there, and in it, he admitted that he'd gone way too far the evening before. He admitted that it had been his emotions that had done the talking for him, and he apologized for all the offensive things he'd said. And finally he said that while his political convictions remained the same, he was willing to continue working with the others in spite of their differing philosophies.

After Greg had finished reading his statement, Ray looked at him with an expression that showed the pain he still felt from the night before and asked, "Did you really mean it? What you said about us not accomplishing anything around here? Did you mean it?"

"Oh no, not at all. I was just mad. I was just shooting off my mouth, that was all. I didn't mean it." But even as he said it, he wasn't really all that sure. He didn't know what he truly believed deep down inside. He didn't know whether he believed it or not.

* * * * *

It had been raining hard for much of the night, and by now the flat bottomland around the farm was flooded. The farm itself was dry except for some of the fields, and the main road was dry, but the dirt road leading up to the farm was under as much as a foot of water. And this on the day when the Mississippi-Alabama-Tennessee branch of the VVAW was supposed to hold a meeting there at the farm.

In order to meet them and guide them to the farm across the flooded land, Greg had driven his old pickup truck out to the main road, and now he sat and watched and waited for them to come. He didn't have a watch so he didn't know how long he had waited, but it seemed like it must have been an hour or so before a small group of cars finally drove up and turned onto the dirt road.

They pulled to a stop and a guy got out of the lead car, a good looking guy with slightly shaggy hair and wearing a neat shirt and jeans. He came over with a grin and a handshake and introduced himself as Steve, the contact man between the VVAW and Liberation Farm. He was open and friendly in the way he talked, and he had the natural graciousness of the true southern gentleman, and Greg took a liking to him as soon as he met him.

Greg pointed out the problem of the flooded road, and he recommended that they should leave any low-slung cars parked right there where they were while the higher ones followed along behind him. Because with everything flooded the way it was, there was no way for them to see where the road was. You just had to know where it was if you wanted to stay out of the ditches and make your way to the farm. And so with Steve in the cab beside him and with a couple of other vehicles behind, Greg began to slowly plow his way along just like a boat putting across a lake. As the water rose, almost reaching the floorboards at one point, Steve looked over at Greg more than once with a concerned expression on his face. He hoped this guy knew what he was doing.

* * * * *

The little pig had gotten loose, the pig that Ray had named in honor of a visitor who came by the farm shortly after the incident with those redneck kids. The little pig that Ray had jokingly named Sheriff Baker. Well, the sheriff was loose today, and Greg and Bob were trying to catch him. But that's easier said than done as not only was he small and fast, but at the same time, he was very hard to get hold of once you did catch up to him.

Bob was running along behind him as he circled the house, and so thinking that he could outsmart the pig, Greg decided to run around the house in the opposite direction. He was just reaching one of the corners of the house when the pig spotted him and veered out of his way. And then just as Greg was pulling up to change directions and follow him, Bob came charging around the corner and smashed right into him, sending both of them sprawling onto the ground. Meanwhile, the sheriff made good his escape out into one of the fields.

LAST CHAPTER?

This time there was no warning. This time there was no Lonnie to wake people up, and there was no shouting outside, either. This time Greg didn't know that anything was wrong until suddenly he was awakened by the sound of a gunshot. He lay there half awake for a moment, telling himself that it was okay. It was only a gunshot.... Only a gunshot! And he was instantly wide awake and jumping out of bed.

Jan was already up before him, moving about the building and whispering in a loud voice, "Wake up! Everybody get up! We've gotta get outa here!" Greg started to do the same when he heard two more shots, one right after the other, and the sound reminded him of what his own role was supposed to be. It reminded him of the loaded rifle that was now kept beneath his own bed. And when he thought about that rifle, he knew right away that his real job at this moment was to go out there and get into the fight. He could leave it to Jan to awaken the others. He had to get outside right now, and so without even taking the time to put on his pants, he

merely grabbed them with one hand while he grabbed the rifle with the other and went charging out the door with his balls flopping from side to side.

He ran to the edge of the field behind the A-frame where he threw himself onto the ground and then turned to see where the shots had come from. And while his heart was racing fast as he lay there, his mind was totally calm and alert, ready to size up the situation and ready to respond to it, whatever it might be. He felt no emotion whatsoever besides a deep calm.

He surveyed the area between the A-frame and the main house, but there was no one in sight. No one and nothing except a couple of Molotov cocktails that were laying on the ground a short distance from the house, one of them with the rag still burning. It looked like Ray or Sharon must have seen the attackers coming and opened fire on them before they could throw their firebombs. Then looking down past the other end of the A-frame, down by the road and the entrance to the driveway, he could make out several people crouching down in the shadows and occasionally firing a shot or two in the direction of the house. And as he looked even farther in that direction, he could see several cars parked some distance away down the road.

The nightriders didn't seem to have seen him in the dark, and so without even having to stop and think about it, he knew exactly what it was that he had to do at that moment. He had to circle around them and open a new front against them. He had to flank them. So after first putting on his pants as quickly as he could, he began to crawl away just as Jan and Richard and one or both of the Black Muslim women who were staying there that night came running out of the A-frame and flopped down into the field nearby. Greg didn't wait for anyone else to emerge before getting up and moving away as quickly as he could, crouching low and running for short distances before dropping back down onto the ground, working his way far out into the field, out to where he would be able to get behind the Klansmen. And as he got far enough out to see around the A-frame, he saw that there were more attackers that he hadn't seen before. He saw that there were two more of them out in the big driveway running toward the street light near the entrance, running along and carrying a third man who looked like he'd been shot.

When Greg had gone slightly past the Klansmen, out to a point where they would think they were being surrounded, he worked the bolt on his rifle and squeezed off a shot above their heads. He shot that way intentionally because he didn't really want to shoot any of them. He didn't want to hurt them. He just wanted to scare them and make them go away. A couple of them responded to his shot by firing wildly out into the field, out toward where they seemed to think the shot had come from. But then when he shifted his position slightly and fired a second and third shots above their heads, the Klansmen's courage seemed to evaporate almost entirely. One after the other, they began to jump up and go racing down the road toward their cars, and soon it turned into a scene of general panic. They were in such a hurry to get out of there that they even left the two guys with their wounded comrade behind.

Greg shifted to a new position even farther out into the field, and from there he squeezed off a couple more shots just to make sure that they kept going. He didn't want them to regain their courage and return to the fight. And then once he thought they'd had enough, he sat back and watched them go, running and jumping into their cars and starting them up and turning them around as fast as they could on the narrow road, getting into each others' way and banging into each other a few times in their confusion. And finally as the last car was about to leave, the

stragglers caught up to it and put the wounded man into the backseat before jumping in themselves just as the car took off like a shot. And the last that Greg saw of them was when one of the cars paused in its flight just long enough to fire a couple of goodbye shots in the general direction of the farm before taking off again.

Once they were gone, Greg began walking back toward the house, and he soon heard Jan's voice calling out and asking if everyone was okay. Greg answered her when he got within range, and so did the others from the A-frame, all of them except Bob, that is. Bob didn't answer when she called him by name, Bob who because he slept in the loft and because he was a very heavy sleeper as well, had surely been the last person out of the building. But even he must have had time to make it outside, so where could he be right now?

Jan continued to call him, and she began to search while Greg came running up to help, running as fast as he could. Before he could get there, though, he heard Jan yell, "He's over here!" And a moment later, Greg arrived at the corner of the A-frame and glanced around it to see Bob lying just outside the entrance to the building, lying there motionless with Jan kneeling down beside him.

And when Greg saw Bob lying there like that, he was suddenly filled with such a wave of emotions, such an overwhelming wave. He was filled with all the emotions that he hadn't felt up until then, all the emotions that he'd kept suppressed during the emergency. Because up until that very moment, he hadn't felt anything at all, not fear, not anger, not a thing. Up until that moment he'd been operating on autopilot, on a pure survival instinct that allowed no room for emotion. But now that there was no longer any need for suppression, it all came pouring out. The feeling that came flooding over him wasn't one of fear or anything of that sort, though, nothing that could be connected with the gunfight he'd just been through. No, not at all. What he felt had nothing to do with fear. What he felt was an overpowering sense of emptiness, of absolute and complete nothingness. What he felt was despair, deep despair at the meaninglessness of Bob's death. And the only word that came to his mind at that moment to express his feelings was waste.

What a waste! What a waste the whole thing was. What a waste of a life to die here defending this phony patch of "liberated" ground in this phony revolution. And not only was Bob's death a waste, but everything was a waste: the revolution, the counter-culture, the whole society. All of it was nothing but a waste of time and energy.

In fact, this whole generation was a waste! I mean, just look at how people from this generation would go to Vietnam and "waste" people over there. And then what would the others do, the others who didn't go to Vietnam? Why, they'd hang around and get "wasted" on drugs. And in the end, that's all that any of them were doing was wasting their time, whether it was over there in that sorry excuse for a war or over here in this make-believe revolution. Both of them were meaningless. Both of them were nothing but a huge waste. So that's what this generation should really be called: it was the wasted generation. It was totally and completely wasted.

And how could a revolution ever be more of a waste of time than this one? How could more energy ever have been expended for less final result than in this so-called revolution? Because the government was no closer to being overthrown now than it had ever been. And as

far as creating an alternative society, one that could someday replace the old, corrupt, decadent mainstream society, did a few isolated communes and collectives actually constitute an alternative? Were they a true working model of a new society, or were they just a big waste of energy? Were they ever really going to replace the old American mainstream? And as far as the counter-culture went, the whole idea just seemed like a waste of time, and especially so with a culture like this one, because when you got right down to it, this counter-culture wasn't actually counter at all. This counter-culture was in many ways nothing more than an intensification of mainstream society, an intensification of that society's ills. Because if the mainstream was hedonistic and self-indulgent and wasteful, the counter-culture was even more so. The counter-culture was just a sick society multiplied and carried to its logical extreme.

So what was there to fight for around here? What was there to die for?

"He'll be okay. It looks like he just ran into the door on his way out," said Jan after she'd had a chance to examine Bob. But as far as Greg and his feelings were concerned, that fact didn't make very much difference right then, and while he was glad that Bob was okay, he still felt completely overwhelmed by his sense of loss, his sense of waste. Even when Ray came over and congratulated him on having chased off the Klan the way he had, he couldn't muster any sort of positive emotion. And when Ray joked with him about giving him a medal for his performance, all he could give in reply was a weak smile.

He knew right then that it was time for him to leave. But he wouldn't do it right away. He wouldn't let Ray accuse him of leaving because of fear over this incident. He'd wait a week or so and then he'd go, and that way he'd have time to make up an excuse for leaving. That way, he wouldn't have to explain his true motives. That way, he wouldn't have to explain his disillusionment.

PART III: THE HILLS

Next morning, I got my bag of food down from the tree where I'd cached it and made my breakfast. I still cached it the same way each night, tied up in a tree some distance from camp, even though I knew there was probably nothing left in it that would attract a bear. But since losing it would be such a disaster, my little evening and morning rituals seemed like they were worth the effort. This way, I was sure the food would still be there in the morning.

I brought my friend the fire back to life very briefly, just long enough to heat my breakfast, and then I let him die away again. There'd be time for another long visit this evening. I packed my gear quickly this morning as I already had the system down, and it wasn't long before I was on my way, hiking up the ridge in the same direction I'd been going the day before. But today wasn't going to be like the day before, as I soon found out when I came upon the first big patch of thick bush that I'd encountered on my journey back to civilization, the first patch so big that I couldn't simply go around it, so big that I had no choice but to fight my way through it. And though it proved to be an isolated patch, still it was a sign, a sign that today wasn't going to be an easy, exhilarating stroll like yesterday had been. A sign that today was going to be a struggle.

I fought my way through the thick, chest-high bush and continued on, climbing for another half-mile or so until the land began to flatten out. And as it became flatter, it also became wetter and wetter, so wet in fact that I was soon forced to get out my galoshes and put them on over my running shoes. And then it wasn't long after I'd put them on that the land turned into an all out marsh, a marsh that not only slowed my progress and made me fight for every step I took, but also one where the number of mosquitoes buzzing around my head seemed to increase exponentially as I progressed.

The mosquitoes were bad everywhere I'd gone around here and I'd become accustomed to them, or at least as accustomed as it's possible to become to those little winged vampires. But now as I proceeded, they became absolutely unbearable. They were everywhere around me and on me, everywhere but my face and hands where the repellent I'd applied generally seemed to prevent them from landing. But while they wouldn't actually land on my face, and while the few of them that did so would quickly take off again, still they were swarming everywhere, all around my head and body and just in front of my face. And there were so many of them and they were flying so close by that I was constantly inhaling them. I did my best to breathe exclusively through my nose so that they would be easy to blow right back out again when I did inhale them. But with all the effort I was having to put out just to keep going across the ever softer and mushier ground, it became impossible to avoid periods of mouth-breathing. And whenever I was forced to breathe through my mouth, I found myself spitting out mosquitoes after every few breaths, spitting them out or else swallowing them if they flew too far down my throat for me to be able to get them back out again.

Soon the land flattened out completely as I came to the top of the ridge, and I could now see the marsh stretching out ahead of me, stretching out for a mile or so before dropping off down the other side. And while the sight of the marsh and the mountains beyond should have struck me with its awesome beauty, I was completely unable to appreciate it thanks to the huge

swarms of mosquitoes. Those little assholes were turning this beautiful spot into a place of misery, one where I couldn't even stop and take a look at the scenery because of the way they would swarm and pounce upon me so mercilessly each time I stopped walking even for a moment. So I had to keep going step after struggling step, fighting and sloshing my way through the marsh while seeing nothing of its beauty and hearing nothing at all but the hum of a million mosquitoes.

I'd learned several years earlier during a bad acid trip that the worst thing about hell-on-earth is the way that all sense of time seems to disappear. The way that the hell seems to go on forever, for all eternity. And now in that very same way, time seemed to come to a stop for me. Now my suffering seemed to become eternal. But fortunately for me, time continued to exist on some other level, so there finally arrived a moment when I reached the far end of the marsh and began to descend. There finally arrived a moment when the worst of my hell began to recede.

I'd descended a short distance when I knew that I had to stop and get my bearings. And as bad as the mosquitoes still were at this moment, it would have been even worse for me if I were to start out in the wrong direction now and then have to backtrack later on. So I stopped and got out my map and my compass, and I sighted off in the direction I wanted to go. And as I did so, I occasionally swatted at the mosquitoes that covered my clothes. I knew it was useless to do so, but still it gave me some slight satisfaction to kill a few of them—thirty or forty or more at a swat since that was how many of them generally covered an area the size of my hand. As I looked and sighted out ahead, I could see that the land consisted of a confused series of low hills and ridges running off in all directions. And since neither the land I saw nor the map showed any clear path for me to follow, I knew that I'd be forced to improvise in this area, to consult my compass frequently and then make my way as best I could.

Soon I was moving in the direction I wanted to go again, dropping down from the big ridge I'd just crossed and fighting my way through the trees and thick bush at the bottom before starting up one of the lower ridges that lay beyond. By the time I began to climb this new ridge, the number of mosquitoes buzzing around my head had dropped back down to its normal level, back to the level I'd become accustomed to during my month in the bush, so that I could finally begin to relax and enjoy myself again. And then I felt even better when I reached the top of the ridge and found a game trail running along it, running in more-or-less the direction I wanted to go, which meant that all I would have to do now was to follow the trail. No more marshes and no more thick bush for me.

These animals are smart out here. They always take the easiest path, following along the tops of the ridges where the going is best and the mosquitoes fewest. So I gladly followed their trail, stopping to consult my compass whenever the trail branched and picking the one that looked like it held closest to my desired direction. Because while the animals are smart, they have no interest in compass directions or specific destinations like the road I was trying to reach, so it was left up to me to make those decisions for myself.

After awhile, the ridge I was following and all its paths curved off to the right, away from the direction I wanted to go, which left me with a decision: either I could continue to follow this trail to who-knows-where, or I could leave it and make my way over to the next ridge which hopefully ran in a direction closer to the course I wanted to follow. The choice was obvious,

though, as I had to follow the compass. I had to cross over. And soon I was making my way downhill and fighting through the tightly packed trees and thick bush that filled the gap between the ridges before beginning to climb once again. And then once I reached the top of the ridge, I came upon a new game trail that led off in the direction I wanted to go, a new trail that I would be able to follow toward my destination. I repeated this same process several times over the next few hours, and in this way, the midday portion of my day's hike evolved into a series of easy walks along game trails that were occasionally broken up by brief periods of struggling through the thick bush between the ridges.

At one point as I was strolling along a game trail, I began to get an uncomfortable feeling down inside, a feeling that something wasn't right—a feeling of impending danger. It was just like that feeling I'd gotten when the river had warned me about the rapids, and now I began to ask myself if someone or something—the trees or the rocks or the hills—was warning me that there was some new danger up ahead. The feeling grew more intense as I continued on, and it became especially strong when I reached a fork in the path and began to take the left fork, the one that led in the direction my compass told me to go. It became so powerful right then that I hesitated for a moment, for several moments, before finally changing my mind and taking the right fork instead. Because while the compass was saying one thing, my friend the forest was telling me something else. It was telling me that there was danger along that left fork.

I'd gone a few hundred yards up the right fork of the trail when I began to see a shape up ahead and a little off to the left, a large, dark shape that I soon made out to be that of a bear, a big black bear that was walking and foraging its way along the other fork. The bear hadn't seen me yet as I slowed my pace, moving along calmly and unaggressively so as not to startle it when it finally spotted me. And while it was only a black bear and would supposedly run away when it saw me, I knew that you really couldn't count on that happening out here in the wilderness, out here where the bear had surely never seen a person before and so had no reason to be afraid of me. Out here, it was more likely to be curious about me than it was to be afraid. And as I thought about that fact while looking at the bear off in the distance, I began to feel alone—truly alone—for the first time since I'd been out here in the wild. For the first time, I felt like I was completely on my own.

In a way, I felt like that poor little porcupine must have felt when he looked at me and wondered whether or not our relationship was going to be that of hunter and hunted. Because now I was asking myself that very same question: were we hunter and hunted, with me being the hunted? And while I had an advantage in my rifle, he had every other advantage over me in any type of violent confrontation. He had the speed and the strength and the claws and the teeth. All I had on my side were a few bullets.

I didn't take my eyes off him as I moved cautiously along the trail, and when he finally saw me, I froze in my tracks and worked a bullet into the chamber of my rifle. And at the same time, my stomach rose into my throat. He stopped what he was doing to look me over, and he even rose up onto his hind legs to get a better view. And then the two of us stood and stared at each other, just stood there and stared for what seemed like minutes—or even hours. We stared and stared, my heart thumping loudly in my chest, until he finally seemed to lose interest in me and, getting back down onto all fours, he continued on his way down the trail. Evidently, he'd decided that I wasn't worth any more of his time. He'd decided that our relationship wasn't that

of hunter and hunted. Our relationship was one of indifference, so that the only thing we could do was to each walk away as though nothing had ever happened.

As I walked on, and as my stomach left my throat and returned to its proper place, and as the electricity that had been pulsing through my body began to subside, I didn't feel so much relieved as I felt triumphant. I felt like I'd just passed another test of some sort. I felt strong and proud and in control of my own destiny. Why, I even felt a bit cocky: It just goes to show you, I said to myself. The best weapon you have for defending yourself against bears out here isn't a rifle, and it sure as hell isn't noise makers meant to chase the bears away. Cause out here in the wilderness, those things would probably backfire. They'd probably attract the bears instead of scaring them off. No, your best weapon out here is your alertness, your paying attention, your being awake and aware at all times. Your best weapon is keeping your eyes open and being aware of your surroundings and seeing the bear before he sees you. That's the most important thing, that seeing him first, since it gives you time to react. Because the worst thing of all is to stumble upon a bear suddenly, to find yourself getting taken by surprise.

What I didn't talk to myself about, though, was the warning I'd received about the danger ahead, the warning that had come from the woods or the hills or wherever. And maybe that was because I didn't know how to incorporate it—the selflessness and the quiet humility that had allowed me to hear the warning—into my present mood of triumphalism.

I walked along the ridges for hours, sometimes seeing the impressive snow-covered mountain range off to my right and sometimes not, and sometimes dropping down and fighting my way through thick trees and bush to cross over to another ridge. Then finally I caught a glimpse of the lake up ahead and off to the left, the lake where I planned to camp that night, and I saw it again a short time later. And though I could see that it was still miles away, even so it gave me a warm feeling to know that the end of my day's hike was actually in sight.

Since I could now see my destination up ahead, I no longer made use of my map or my compass. Instead, I simply took whichever forks in the trail looked like they led most directly toward the lake. In so doing, I generally took the branches that led off to the left, off in the direction of the lake, and I eventually found myself angling down that side of the ridge with the lake directly ahead of me. I could see it getting bigger all the time as I went, and it looked like it was maybe a mile or so up ahead. Less than two miles anyway. I walked along contentedly on the easy downhill slope, already thinking about setting up camp and catching a fish in the lake, when suddenly the trail came to an end. Or rather the trail suddenly disappeared into a huge patch of thick, chest-high bush, a patch that stretched out ahead of me as far as I could see. And as I stopped to look, it seemed to stretch all the way down the side of the ridge, maybe even all the way to the lake.

So what should I do now? Should I keep on going and hope that it wasn't really as bad as it looked? Hope that the bush would thin out again somewhere up ahead? Or should I turn back and look for a different trail? What should I do?

If I were to turn back, what guarantee did I have that I'd be able to find an easier way down to the lake? What if one didn't exist? After all, I was dealing with nature here, nature in its purest form. There was nothing manmade out here, not even the trails, so everything around me

conformed to the ways of nature: everything was haphazard. Everything was disordered since the order of nature is disorder. There were no straight lines anywhere, and there was no plan. Things just happened to be where they happened to be and that was all. Everything was arbitrarily placed.

So when I got right down to it, what other choice did I have but to continue on? It was the only sensible thing to do. I'd just have to fight my way down there, that was all. I'd have to fight my way through the thick bush all the way to the lake if that was what it took to get there. I had no other real choice. And with that thought in mind, I soon plunged ahead into the bush, weaving my way through it and trying to avoid the thickest patches, but always keeping my eyes on the lake. And as I went, I was thankful that at least the bush was low enough that I could always see where I was going. At least I wasn't having to fight my way through it blind.

I pushed and shoved and fought my way down the ridge, branches repeatedly tearing at my clothes and my backpack as I went, and the whole time the bush continued just as thick as ever. It didn't thin out and it didn't end. It just went on and on for what seemed like forever. It went on, and I fought on, fought all the way to the bottom of the ridge, all the way down to where the bush finally ended just as suddenly as it had started. Right there at the bottom of the ridge, almost at the very edge of the lake.

I was truly relieved to finally reach my goal—and to finally be out of the bush—and I wanted to greet the lake in some way or other. I wanted to say hello to it and introduce myself. But could I do that? Could I even stop long enough to perform that simple little ceremony? Hell no! Not with those damned mosquitoes who were now launching another mass attack upon me. It was terrible. It was almost unbearable because here I was, tired and sweaty after my long struggle through the bush, but now instead of finding rest and relief, I found that I couldn't even stop for a moment. And I couldn't even so much as open my shirt or roll up the sleeves since that would have exposed too much skin to those little blood-suckers. And down here by the shore of the lake they were thick and getting thicker by the second. It was torture just to stop long enough to put on my galoshes, and the swarm seemed to grow bigger with every step I took along the marshy ground that bordered the lake, with every foot that I struggled to place in front of the other as I fought my way along the shore, sweating and breathing heavily and inhaling mosquitoes.

So I couldn't perform my little ceremony. I couldn't do anything but keep going, keep grimly pushing on along the lake in the direction of the road. And all the while I asked myself if I hadn't made a big mistake in coming to this lake. Would I really be able to camp here tonight, or would the mosquitoes drive me nuts? Would they force me to leave and search out some other place to spend the night even though I was already dead tired? Well whatever the case, I knew that I sure as hell couldn't spend the night where I was right now. I knew that my only chance was to keep going and hope for the best. I had to believe that there must be a better, drier spot somewhere up ahead along this lake. I had to cling to that slim hope as I pressed on, hugging the shore and making my way slowly along the wet ground where, even though the going was excruciatingly difficult with my feet sinking in at every step, at least there was no bush for me to deal with. Because as bad as it was out here on this marsh being attacked by these swarms of mosquitoes, it was still better than fighting my way through any more thick bush.

I went on and on, slogging my way through the marsh while being bombarded by mosquitoes—repeating the hell that I'd been through that morning—and feeling that the situation was truly hopeless. I was feeling so bad that I even thought about giving it all up, about lying down and dying right there, about getting it over with once and for all. But then after a time—after another eternity spent in hell—things finally began to improve. The bush began to recede from the lake so that I could move over and get away from the marsh, get up onto drier ground. And as I continued on along the shore, things just kept getting better and better. The land kept getting drier and more open all the time, all the way up to the very head of the lake, or at least to the point that lay farthest out in the direction of the road.

And once I reached that point and looked around, I felt that I'd finally found the perfect place to camp, or at least I'd found a place where I'd be able to spend a reasonably comfortable night. There was no bush anywhere nearby, just a few scattered trees here and there, which meant that I'd be able to make my camp wherever I wanted, at any distance from the lake I chose. And in any case the ground over by the lake wasn't nearly as marshy around here as it had been even a little ways back. It wasn't such a fertile breeding ground for mosquitoes. And in fact the number of mosquitoes had by now fallen back down to a level that I considered bearable, back down to where it was just a normal Yukon swarm.

I was feeling better at last. I was feeling greatly relieved. And no sooner had I picked out a camping spot and plopped down my gear than I thought about going over to say hello to the lake. I thought about performing the little ceremony of greeting that I'd been unable to perform before, and soon I was walking slowly toward the shore, looking out at the lake and silently saying hello. And I said it silently not because of any feeling of the ridiculous that I might have had about saying it out loud. No, I said it in silence because that's the way lakes speak. They don't use words; their speech is silence.

I gathered wood as I returned, and I soon brought my friend the fire back to life. And I was about to pour beans into the cooking pot like I did every evening when I suddenly remembered the oatmeal I still had left. There was just enough for one last serving, and since this would probably be the last place I'd camp before reaching the North Canol Road, I thought that tomorrow morning would be the perfect time to eat it. It would be my farewell breakfast to the wilderness. And considering that there must be plenty of fish in this lake for me to eat, that meant that I'd only be needing a small helping of beans tonight, just enough to accompany the fish.

So I set a few beans onto the fire and assembled my fishing pole, getting ready to go catch the main course. But then when I tried to stand up, I found that my stiff, tired legs just didn't want to cooperate, and it took me several tries before I was able to get up and make my way down to the edge of the lake. I cast out as far as I could and began to reel it back in, and no sooner had I started to do so than I saw what looked like a whole swarm of fish chasing after my spinner. I reeled it all the way back in and, as it neared the shore, I saw that indeed there were fish chasing it, but the problem was that they were all so small that they couldn't even get their mouths around the hook.

Wow, these fish must be really hungry, I said to myself.

I cast a second and third times and the same thing happened each time. Then on my fourth cast, I felt a tug on the line and knew that I'd caught a fish, one big enough to actually bite the hook. And as I reeled it in, I saw that it was a big, fat grayling, the exact perfect fish for supper. I talked to him and apologized as I grabbed hold of him, and while he didn't seem a bit happy with the situation, I think he at least got the idea that he was dying for a good cause. For the cause of providing me with supper.

I soon returned to the fire and brought it up to full, blazing life, and then I set about preparing my meal.

That was some day I had there, huh, old friend. The morning was horrible and the late afternoon was just as bad or maybe even worse because by then I was already so tired. You know, it just goes to show you. Because like yesterday everything went so well. Everything started out so beautifully. But today...

Man, I don't even want to talk about it, it was so bad. It's like you never really know what you're getting yourself into when you start out on something like this. Everything starts out great, and you think that your shit don't stink, and then wham! You have a day like today where everything goes to hell. Oh man, it was awful... And do you know what? It's exactly the same when you start out on a life or a way of life or something. Because if you only knew from the beginning what the bad days were going to be like, you probably wouldn't even start. You wouldn't do anything. You'd just sit around and go along and keep your mouth shut. You'd go for the conformity and the mediocrity. Know what I mean?

The fire didn't answer. The fire just listened.

It's like this life I've been living, this half-assed rebel's life or this half-assed adventurer's life or whatever you want to call it. Do you think for one minute that I'd ever have started out on it if I'd known what the bad days were going to be like? No fucking way. I'd have done exactly the opposite of what I did. I'd have gone along and gotten along. I'd have gotten a job and a house and raised one-point-five kids or whatever the average is. I'd have been mister normal, mister All-American guy. I'd have put up and shut up. I'd... Hey, it looks like those rice and beans are almost ready. I'd better get the fish to frying.

I finished cooking my meal and then sat back to eat it, and with each bite I took, I felt my strength coming back to me. It had been a tough, exhausting day, but now that I was finally eating something, I felt myself beginning to recharge at last. I ate everything I had, all the beans and rice and all the fish, and with that I began to feel like myself again. I felt my energy level increasing and my spirits rising, and I finally began to feel like maybe I would be able to go on after all. Like maybe I would actually be able to hike all the way to the road and the civilization it represented. And besides, I knew that tomorrow would be an easier day than today. I knew that the distance would be shorter since I'd already come more than half the way from that big ridge to the road. And so now between the physical uplift that the food was providing me and the psychological uplift that came from my knowledge that the worst of the trip was over, I felt my confidence returning to me at last. My confidence in myself and my confidence in my undertaking.

You know fire, it's not really all that bad after all. I mean at least I made it all the way here, didn't I? And this is a good spot to camp. This is a great spot. So whatever I went through today, well, at least it's over and done with now. It's something I'll never have to do again. This has been one of those bad days that we all have, but I got through it and that's all there is to say.

It's like with those other bad days I had in my life: I got through them. I went through all the bad shit, but then I finally came out the other end and things got better, you know what I mean? It's like I came through the darkness—the darkness of the soul or whatever you want to call it—like I came through it and out into the light again. But you know what? The light I came into wasn't exactly the same light as it had been before, not like it would have been if I'd simply turned around halfway and gone back or something like that. No, the light I came out into was like a brand new one, like the light you would find when you've finally gone all the way through, all the way to the other side of despair. Do you know what I mean?

The fire didn't respond to my question. The fire maintained its noble silence.

Do you think that's too strong? Too dramatic? All that darkness of the soul, and that other side of despair stuff? Well maybe it is. But I'm telling you the truth when I say that I went through some dark days, some very dark days. I mean, I definitely know what despair is all about. But in the end I didn't let myself get trapped in it. I found a way to work through it and get over it. I found a way to push ahead with my life. And do you know how I did it? I did it by developing my mind, by seeking more profound knowledge, an even deeper understanding of the world than what it had taken to plunge me into the despair in the first place. Because while it was probably an excess of awareness that first drove me into the darkness of despair, it was an even greater excess of awareness that eventually drove me beyond that darkness and back out into the light. And the critical moment came when I finally decided not to stay put and wallow in my despair. Not to stay and not to turn back, either, by becoming a Christian or joining some other cult that would do all the thinking for me, or by abandoning thought altogether and drowning in some meaningless nihilism. Instead I chose to push on with my life, to resume my quest for knowledge, to rededicate myself to developing my mind.

And when you get right down to it, that's what my life has been all about right from the beginning. It's been about the quest for knowledge, about learning and understanding, and I'm talking here about truly understanding things, all the way down to their very depths. Because that's always been my number one interest in life. That's always been my goal. It was never really Experience! that I sought, and it was never Revolution! No, those were just distractions. They were detours. My life was really all about knowledge. My life was really one big, long search for knowledge.

And I'm not talking here about any sort of superficial, intellectual understanding of the world and the things in it. That's never what I sought. No, what I always wanted was a truly profound understanding, a spiritual knowledge of life and the world. I wanted the knowledge that goes all the way, the knowledge that goes as far as knowledge can possibly go—and then goes even further. The knowledge that reaches the very limits of knowledge and then keeps right on going.

I mean let's face it. My life was never really about adventure or politics or rebellion or anything like that. My life was always a quest for something mental and spiritual, a quest for enlightenment if I can use that word. My life was always a religious quest.

CHAPTER ONE (First Try)

America, I despise you, despise you as only a lover can. I despise your soft, bloated belly and your junk-food mind and your greed and your hypocrisy. I despise what you've become, what you've allowed yourself to become, when you could have been so very much more.

I despise your standard-of-living for which you've so willingly sacrificed your ideals and your beautiful land. I despise your relentless pursuit of convenience in life-style and in thought—your unending search for easy answers—and I despise your worship of selfish individualism as the highest form of enlightened behavior. And most of all, I despise your empty, materialist Dream. I despise it, and I reject it.

That's right, me. The Golden Boy. The Golden Boy from the Golden State in the Golden Generation. The living, breathing realization of the Dream. I'm the one who rejects it. And I do so not so much because it's a bad Dream, but rather I reject it because it isn't my Dream. I didn't create it, and I didn't approve it. I simply inherited it. And I'm saying right here and now that I won't accept it. I won't accept being nothing more than the realization of some other generation's Dream. Instead, I'll fight for the right to make my own American Dream, to make my own version of America—to make the revolution.

But you say that the revolution has failed? Well, what if it has? That just means that we'll have to find another revolution.

I used to think that we could fix everything in one great, glorious revolution, but now I see that there's not going to be anything great or glorious about the way that this country—as we know it—comes to an end. It'll simply continue going downhill the way it has been, going ever further downhill and declining at an ever increasing rate until finally the whole thing just collapses around our ears. The system is out of control, it's a roller-coaster with no one at the control lever, it's a system without purpose or goals, one dedicated to selfishness and corruption and dog-eat-dog, but in the end, it's the system itself that will be eaten.

Do you hear that, America? You're going to be eaten. The barbarian hordes are going to eat you, and you can't prevent it, since your barbarian hordes aren't waiting somewhere outside the gates, but they're right here inside you. They're part of your country and part of your society, and I'm one of them. That's right, America, I'm one of the people who are going to destroy you, one of those who are going to kill you and bury you and then dance on your grave.

It's so sad to see what's happening in this country. I mean, the signs are all there: the corruption, the small-mindedness, the hedonism. This country is degenerating so fast that it's painful to watch. But watch is all I do. I watch and do nothing, and I no longer care. I watch, and I laugh, and I cry at the same time. I laugh because "I told you so," and I cry because it's so horrible to watch. But mostly I laugh because I prefer that to crying.

I'm only twenty-two and already all the hope and promise of the future are gone. Already, I've grown old. Why, just a year ago, I was so much younger, so hopeful and so innocent, but now I feel like there's nothing more to look forward to. I used to pin all my hopes and dreams on the counter-culture. I used to say that everything would be okay once people became enlightened, but now I see that it's not going to happen. The hippies, the Yippies, the New Left, LSD enlightenment, it was all a hoax, a myth, a practical joke on the world. And somehow I always knew it, knew that it was a joke, but still I thought it was a joke we were playing on the rest of the world. I didn't see that the real butt of the joke was us, the people who pinned our hopes on it. I didn't see that in reality, the joke was on us.

(Fragments)

Some guy I'd met on the road had told me that Aspen was a happening place and so, being in the vicinity that summer, I decided to go check it out. And though I only stayed there for a couple of days, still there was something about the place and the people and the vibes that helped to bring a lot of things to a head.

In the last two years on the road, I'd pretty well lost track of what was going on in the better-off sectors of American society, and so it came as quite a shock to me to see Aspen with all its phony, moneyed hipness. And it wasn't so much the phoniness of the people and the place that got to me—no, I'd seen pseudos and semis everywhere I'd gone—but rather it was the commercialization of hipness there that made the deepest impression on me. Because in Aspen I saw the purest, most blatant example I'd ever seen of the counter-culture being packaged and sold—in a sanitized form, of course—to a lot of people who could afford to pay the outrageous prices that the “hip capitalists” were demanding.

Seeing Aspen, it suddenly became so clear to me: the selling-out of the counter-culture, the defeat of the Revolution—the degeneration of the Revolution into a simple fashion revolution for the well-to-do. In short, the utter futility of anything and everything that I thought I'd stood for during the last few years. And I wanted to vent my rage somehow, to yell and scream, to break the complacency, to destroy the comfortable mediocrity of America.

But in the end all I did was sit in the cab of my rusty old pickup and make a short-lived first attempt at beginning to write this book.

* * * * *

I was driving through Colorado, my pickup full of hitchhikers front and back, when I came across a Cadillac that was stopped alongside the road with a middle-aged-middle-class white guy out trying to flag down help. I pulled over and climbed out and asked him what was wrong, and he said he'd run out of gas and needed a ride to a gas station, so I told him to hop in. He hesitated for a minute, then kind of shrugged his shoulders and climbed into the camper-shell with all the hitchhikers.

I stopped at the first gas station I came to and let him out, and he came right over to my window to thank me for the ride. And as a way of thanking me, he held out a five-dollar bill for me to take. I looked at the bill, then waved my hand and mumbled, “No thanks.” But he insisted

and thrust the money closer, urging me to go ahead and take it, so that I was finally obliged to turn him down more emphatically. “You don’t have to pay me for the ride. It was free.”

“Ah, go ahead. Take it!”

“Nah, no thanks, I don’t want money.... But I tell you what. If you wanta pay me back, just next time you see someone who needs a ride, stop and pick him up. That’s the best way to pay me.”

He looked at me a bit quizzically, then put the money away and said thanks, and I drove off. The road-freak sitting in the cab next to me said, “Hey, man, that was a beautiful thing you said to that guy,” and I mumbled out, “Yeah, right,” or something to that effect.

A beautiful thing, a beautiful gesture. A meaningless, empty gesture. A futile attempt to spread a revolution that had already failed, and a half-hearted attempt at that since I already knew it was useless before I’d even said it. But what else could I say? What else could I do? I had to continue living out my convictions even though I knew it would lead to nothing. I had to continue making these gestures even though I no longer believed in them. I had to continue going through the motions. I had to since it was the only way I knew how to live.

MEAGAN

I’d managed to evade the feelings of emptiness and despair while I was aboard that broken-down old bulk-carrier to Africa since being on the ship had temporarily gotten me away from my wasted hippie-revolutionary life and gotten me back into my other life, my seaman’s life. But the emptiness had quickly returned when I’d spent the winter hanging out in California with nothing to do, and it had only partially left again in the spring when I’d headed north to play tourist in Alaska and the Yukon Territory. And it was only when I’d met Eric in Whitehorse and we’d floated down the Yukon River together that I’d ever really lost the feeling again. It was only during those days on the river that I’d been at peace with myself, at peace and contented and happy. But now that the trip had ended and Eric had left, and now that I’d moved into Meagan’s cabin on the outskirts of Dawson City, the emptiness was steadily creeping back in.

But don’t get me wrong. Meagan had nothing to do with my returning despair. Nothing at all. She was a wonderful woman. She was special. I mean, how many women have you ever met floating down the Yukon River all by themselves the way Eric and I met Meagan? And even though, as a native Yukoner, she knew that the river was pretty tame, it still amazed me that she’d actually taken it on all by herself in her little rubber raft. And not only was she an amazing person, but she was also beautiful.

Why, if only she’d been my “type” physically, I’d have been madly in love with her. As it was, our relationship was a near-perfect shack-up, with plenty of sex and companionship but no real danger of any sort of deep emotional involvement on the part of either one of us. Because after all, she just wasn’t my “type,” and as far as she was concerned, I was simply someone to keep the bed warm until her boyfriend returned from his trip to Mexico. The time I spent with her had been pleasant, maybe even idyllic, and it had held my despair in check. Or at least it had

kept it hidden just below the surface of my feelings, kept it hidden until that one evening when the despair suddenly came bursting in upon me.

I tried to express my feelings to Meagan that evening, but she had no desire to hear them or to help me deal with them. After all, our relationship was nothing but a short-lived fling. It was nothing that required us to bare our souls to each other, and I understood this fact perfectly well. But still I had to talk about it, I just had to since the despair was too strong, too overwhelming for me to think or talk about anything else.

So I started out by talking about Anne, the only woman I'd ever loved but who I'd treated so badly that I'd finally driven her away from me. I'd preferred the revolution and life on the road to spending time with her—I was always leaving without notice whenever my restlessness called me, leaving and not returning for who-knows-how-long—and so I'd finally managed to destroy whatever there may have been between the two of us. And the funny thing about it was that it wasn't until right at the very end, right when I could see that it was too late to salvage our relationship, that I'd ever come to realize that I loved her. I'd been so out of touch with my feelings in those days! I mean, there had been times out on the road when I hadn't even been able to tell that I was thirsty, times when I'd gone for long periods with nothing to drink until I'd actually begun to feel sick to my stomach. And still it hadn't been until someone had just happened to offer me something to drink that I'd finally realized what was wrong, what it was that was making me feel sick. It was only then that I'd become aware of the fact that I was thirsty.

Meagan gave me no feedback as I talked on and on about Anne, and she hardly seemed to listen as I went on to talk about other things like the pointlessness of life and all that. I quoted the most depressing Country Joe and the Fish song I knew, and I went on to complain about how everything has already been said and how it's impossible to ever say or do anything new. And after that I began to talk about death, about my longing for death. I wanted her to sympathize with me, to reinforce my feelings, but she just wouldn't do it, so I kept on trying. I kept taking my despair further and further, kept talking about ever more depressing subjects until, just as I was in the midst of describing ways I might kill myself—slow, painful ways I might kill myself—she finally responded. It wasn't quite the response I'd hoped for, though, as all she said was, "You sure enjoy feeling sorry for yourself, don't you?"

Feeling sorry for myself? Was that what she thought? That all this deep, heartfelt confession I was giving her was nothing more than me feeling sorry for myself? Didn't she recognize existential despair when she saw it!? What was wrong with her? Couldn't she tell the difference between self-pity and the despair that comes to one who has become aware of the hopelessness of the human condition?

I tried to argue with her but she didn't want to listen. I tried to explain but she wasn't interested in what I had to say. I tried to talk, I needed to talk, but she just wouldn't respond. And so my frustration grew. My internal pressure built. It built and built until I finally vented it by smashing my fist into the wall. I felt a tremendous resentment toward her, almost a revulsion, and I felt an urge to walk out on her right then and there.

But I didn't. I didn't leave. I stayed with her, in her cabin, in her bed. I stayed as though nothing had happened. And not only did I stay, but I even attempted to make love to her that night. The sex was mechanical, though, and it ended all at once when I suddenly flashed on my resentment toward her. When I flashed on her as something dirty, something repulsive, something so repulsive that the mere thought of being with her made me go limp, made me come up impotent.

Everything was different when I awoke the next morning, though. Everything was better. I looked over at Meagan still asleep beside me, and I said to myself, you know what, she was right. I was feeling sorry for myself last night. And not just a little bit, either. No, I was drowning in self-pity, literally drowning in it, and the funny thing about it was that I'd actually liked it. I'd actually been enjoying my self-pity. Because after all, self-pity is the safest and most dependable emotion there is. It's an emotion that you can always find an excuse to invoke, and at the same time it's an emotion that allows you to utterly abdicate all responsibility for your life, to abdicate responsibility for your many failures and your shortcomings as you wallow in pity for your poor, pathetic little self. And to make things even better, you can tell yourself that it's not self-pity at all, but rather that it's "despair" or some other high-sounding alias.

But that morning for the first time in a long time, I felt no despair and no self-pity. That morning for the first time in my life I could see right through the illusion. For the first time I could see that though the world and everything in it is meaningless, the fact of its meaninglessness is meaningless as well. And the despair generated by the awareness of the meaninglessness of the world is also totally meaningless, as meaningless as happiness and contentment and all the rest. For the first time I could see that while the world is pointless, that fact is pointless, too. I could see that nothing matters, but so what? What does that matter?

For the first time I began to understand this, to truly understand it deep down inside, and as I did so, I saw myself breaking through and coming out the other side of existential despair. I saw myself breaking through to a world of true freedom, a world where, for the moment at least, I could be free of everything including self-pity and despair. A world where I could cease worrying about meaning and importance and self-importance, but where instead I could just sit back and enjoy the ride, the rollercoaster ride we call life.

NANCI

I was fresh in from Alaska when I walked into the bar of the restaurant where my little brother was working, paid for my drink with a hundred dollar bill from the money I'd just made working on that supply boat, and then asked for my brother. Now, I don't know if it was because of my dramatic entrance or if it was because of all the preliminary work my brother had been doing, but I could sense something in the air that night, something telling me that I had my pick among the cocktail waitresses working there.

Maybe I should have flirted with some of them, but since that's something I'd never really learned how to do, all I did was eat and drink and talk with whoever happened to come by. My brother, who was working the service bar that evening, frequently found time to come by and talk and listen to me describe some of the "adventures" I'd gotten involved in around the Yukon after moving out of Meagan's cabin: the prospecting trips I'd gone on with various people I'd

met around Dawson City and the log cabin I'd helped that guy build out in the bush and all the rest. I already knew one or two of the people working in the restaurant, so I spent a lot of time talking with them, too, and then increasingly as the evening went on, I also spent time talking with Nanci.

Nanci was a beautiful lady, and she was clearly the one I'd have chosen from among all the cocktail waitresses working there if only she hadn't chosen me first. She had a beautiful, slender body that somehow radiated sexuality, and she had the most interesting eyes, one blue and the other brown. And on top of all that, she was one of the most out-front, straight-forward, honest people I'd ever met.

My brother and the other people I knew warned me to be careful around her because she was crazy, but their warnings hardly dampened my enthusiasm for her at all. In fact, if anything they made her seem even more interesting since they confirmed my own impression that she wasn't just another typical American airhead. And besides, that evening she seemed like a good kind of crazy, like a wild, sexy, uninhibited kind of crazy. She was drinking that night for the first time in a long time, and the more she drank, the more she let out all the horniness that she'd long been holding inside. The more she drank, the clearer she made it that she had chosen me as the one upon whom she would unleash all her tremendous sexual energy after a long period of abstinence.

When it was time to close, she was too drunk to find her coat or her car keys, and in any case she was too drunk to drive home, so naturally I volunteered to drive her myself in the car my brother let me borrow. And no sooner were the two of us in the car than she was all over me. She hugged me and kissed me and climbed on me the whole time I was driving—how I avoided having an accident I'll never know since there were long periods when I couldn't see the road at all—and the whole time I was just loving it. But then as we were starting to pull into the parking lot at my brother's place, she suddenly went through a Jekyll-Hyde transition and, jumping back away from me, she blurted out, "Where are you taking me?"

I told her, and she said that she didn't want to go there. She said she wanted to go home instead, and she ordered me to drive her there immediately. Now, I was more than willing to comply with her wishes, but there was just one little problem: the fact that I had no idea of where she lived. When I asked her for directions, though, all she said was, "Drive!" I asked her which way, and she said, "Just drive!" I asked her if we should go left or right, and she yelled back, "Just drive! Just drive!!" And so finally that's exactly what I did: I drove.

I drove around aimlessly for awhile until she calmed down enough to begin giving me directions to her apartment. But then when we got there, no sooner had we pulled into the parking lot than she remembered the fact that she couldn't get inside since she'd lost her keys. She was calm and reasonable by now, so the two of us were able to discuss her predicament in a rational way, and soon it became clear that the only solution was to return to my brother's place where I could sleep on the floor if she so desired. She began warming up to me again as we talked, and it wasn't long before her personality switched back to what it had been earlier. She started fondling me again, then kissing me, then climbing all over me, nearly making love to me right there in the car during the drive back to my brother's place.

She was cumming as soon as we reached the bed, and it wasn't long before I joined her in an orgasm that seemed to go on forever and ever. And finally we both laid back exhausted and drifted off to sleep in each other's arms. After I'd been asleep for some time, she suddenly jumped out of bed and began putting on her clothes, telling me accusingly, "You're just like all the rest of them," and then she went storming out of the house. I was too tired by now to try to reason with her or calm her down, so I just lay there and watched her go, shrugging my shoulders—easy come, easy go—and going back to sleep.

I was awakened again an hour or two later when Nanci reappeared in the room and asked if she could get back into bed with me. She said that she'd walked all the way home only to find that she still didn't have her keys, and since by then she'd also forgotten why she'd been angry at me or why she'd left so suddenly, she'd decided to come on back and be my friend once again. To be my friend and my lover.

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Nanci wasn't nearly as crazy when she was sober, or at least she was crazy in a different way. She was crazy in a good way. She was crazy in a way that was so different and so refreshing. She was the most honest and open person I'd ever met. She had no secrets and no qualms about saying exactly what she thought or felt at any given moment. And because of that, it was easy for me to open up to her like I never had before. In fact, I actually felt comfortable telling her some of my deepest, innermost secrets. I could sit and talk with her for hours, and the two of us would talk about anything and everything.

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Nanci was into all sorts of New Age stuff just like the stereotypical California woman. But the fact was that she'd only moved out there recently after having spent her whole life in Ohio. She introduced me to a lot of ideas and philosophies that were floating around at the time, and we discussed them along with our own personal lives and problems and hang-ups.

And she certainly had a lot of problems to discuss. Because although she was eight years older than me, she was in many ways less mature and less "spiritually" developed. She was still caught up in the despair and negativity that I'd only recently overcome. And because of that, I sometimes played teacher to her at the same time as she taught me.

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Nanci had come to California to get away from a relationship that had been almost pathologically intense. She often referred to that relationship as an addiction, and one of the things that she was doing now to try to get over it was to totally abstain from sex. And that was the reason why she'd blown up at me that first night when she'd suddenly, drunkenly realized that she'd just had sex with me.

She had broken her abstinence, and then on subsequent nights she continued to break it with me over the next two weeks or so. But then one day she told me about her vow, and at the same time she said she didn't want to have sex with me anymore. And once she said it, that was it. Our sexual relationship was over, because like always with her, she was true to her word. So

we never had sex again, and in fact it wasn't long before she stopped all forms of physical contact with me, much to my ongoing frustration.

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My relationship with Nanci was the first sustained relationship I'd ever had with a woman, and in many ways it was a very strange one with the lack of physical contact being only the tip of the iceberg. I quickly fell in love with her, but she refused to return that love while at the same time she refused to reject me altogether. So I found myself in a situation that I really couldn't understand, one where my love for her kept growing and growing, as did my need for her, while nothing of the sort seemed to happen to her. But at the same time, she was warm and open with me, and she always insisted that she wanted our relationship to continue.

It was very confusing for me, and there was a considerable amount of friction, especially at first. In my confusion I was constantly examining and then re-examining my feelings for her. And soon I found myself launched into a long and deep study of not only my own feelings, but also of the very nature of love itself. And while she wouldn't let me cling to her by returning my love, at the same time she wouldn't let me feel sorry for myself by turning me away. Instead she forced me to deal with all the frustrations of a love that had no hope of reward, a love that would never be requited. She forced me to deal with all the emotions of a love that existed only for itself, a love for the sake of love and nothing more.

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After many months together, and after having left town more than once to look for work or for other reasons, and also after having met a couple of other women who were willing to respond to me physically and sexually, Nanci and I began to drift apart. But even then I would return to see her from time to time, to see her and to be with her. And especially so after one of my romantic misadventures when I would return and discuss it with her and get her to help me deal with the emotional aftermath. But then after a couple of years, she moved to southern California and I lost track of her. Because between her moving around and my wandering, there was just no way for the two of us to stay in touch.

And the last time I saw her came when she wrote to me—in one of the very few letters she ever wrote—saying that she'd been thinking about me a lot lately. Knowing the deep psychic bond that existed between the two of us, I immediately went down to see her. And when I got there, I found that she had a friend who was just about to drive from there all the way to northern Canada, and this right at the same time as I was going there myself. Right as I was going there to try to forget about another of my romantic disasters. And so as one last favor to me, Nanci not only helped to talk me through my broken heart, but she also got me a ride to the Yukon.

(Fragments)

I was sitting around the cabin of the old boat in Halifax harbor where I was living, reading a book on eastern philosophy when I heard a commotion outside. The guy who owned this boat had been letting me stay here ever since shortly after I'd bought that other boat from him, that old ship's boat. He'd said that I could stay here until he lined up a place where I would

be able to rebuild and convert my boat, convert it into a design capable of being sailed off into the sunset. And it was a good thing he'd made me the offer to stay here, too, since after paying for my boat, and after projecting how much it would probably cost to fix it up, I found that I had very little money left over to pay for my living expenses. The money from that supply boat in Alaska was already gone, and the money from the tugs was going fast.

When I heard the commotion, I stepped out on deck and saw that something was going on over on the replica of the *Bluenose* that was tied up nearby. I walked over to see what was up, and as I approached the scene, the picture began to grow clear. There was a guy who I'd never seen before standing a little way up in the rigging, yelling and screaming hysterically and trying to get his head into a noose that he'd tied in a piece of running rigging hanging down from the mast. But his attempt at hanging himself was being frustrated by the guy who owned the old tugboat tied up just across the dock, because that guy had hold of the end of the halyard and he was pulling as hard as he could to keep the noose away from the guy's neck.

The tug-of-war went on for a long time, and the guy in the rigging kept yelling the whole time, attracting a small crowd that included not only me but also a couple of young guys who crewed on the *Bluenose*. The two men pulled on the halyard and pulled some more, and then all at once the guy in the rigging gave a big tug and managed to get the thing around his neck, and at the same time he jumped off the rigging and swung back and forth. But no sooner had he launched himself in this way than one of the schooner's agile, young crewmembers went shooting up the mast and cut the halyard, causing him to come crashing down on deck with his head landing on the anchor.

He lay there unconscious while we waited for an ambulance to arrive, and while we were waiting, everyone began to talk about the incident. Everyone demonstrated the fact that they had an opinion on the matter and that they wanted to express it. Everyone, that is, but me. They talked about how rich he was, or at least how rich his father was, and they all seemed to agree that he must have been high on drugs at the time, because why else would a rich kid want to kill himself? There was an acquaintance of mine who came up and said, "That guy's got everything. He must be crazy." And when I disagreed with him and said that the guy would have been happier if he'd given it all away, my companion looked at me like I must be crazy, too.

But I didn't care what he thought. I would soon return to my boat and my solitude. I would soon return to my philosophy. And it was philosophy that I lived for at that moment, especially eastern philosophy, and even more especially the Tibetan Buddhist philosophy that I'd recently discovered. Now I'd never been interested in religion, and I still wasn't, but a short time earlier someone had introduced me to a book on the philosophy behind the religion of Tibetan Buddhism, and when I'd read that book, it had hit me right where I lived. The philosophy it presented had resonated with me in a way that no philosophy ever had before, and it wasn't long before I began to immerse myself in it.

I couldn't get enough of it, and I was always making the rounds of the bookstores in Halifax to pick up whatever I could find on the subject. And on top of reading about it, I was also trying to put it into practice in my life. I was trying to learn various meditation techniques, and at the same time I was launching myself into a very dedicated quest for self-knowledge. Because after all, without self-knowledge there's no basis for knowledge. Which is fine except for the fact

that there's no basis for self-knowledge. So even though I realized that my quest was impossible, still I undertook it. Still I spent my time observing—observing without judging. I wanted to observe everything—myself, my mind, the world around me—to observe them as they were, without expectations and without projecting anything onto them. I wanted to observe them without all the misinterpretations that our minds normally add to our experiences.

And it was to this activity of observing without judging that I dedicated myself during my time in Halifax. Observing without judging and at the same time doing a whole lot of reading.

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This time I was in the opposite role of the one I'd been in five years earlier. This time I was admitted at the border—the border of the United States—while my Canadian friend Dan was turned away. And once the decision had been made, the border guards gave us a chance to say goodbye before we had to split up and go our separate ways, with me continuing on to California and him having to return to Halifax. And as we said goodbye, we redistributed our wealth. He gave me back the money I'd given him in the hope that through our combined resources he would have enough money to get himself admitted to the country, a tactic that had failed thanks to our mutual poverty. Then at the same time as he was returning my money, I suggested that we should also switch coats. Because while both of them were mine, I didn't want to lose my father's old peacoat which he was wearing. I preferred to let him keep the new coat.

And while I had a long, cold trip ahead of me since it was February and I still had to cross the entire United States, Dan might have actually had it worse than me. Not only did he have a lot less experience and survival skills on the road than me, but he was also going to have to hitch his way back through New Brunswick where we'd just had such a hard time. It had taken us two full days just to reach the border at Maine, and now he was going to have to turn around and do it all over again. So maybe I didn't really have it all that bad after all.

In any case it would have been worse for me if I'd stayed in Nova Scotia any longer, because ever since Old Jim had quit work on my boat for the winter and I'd moved back to Halifax, I'd been forced by economic necessity to spend most of my time staying at the Sally Anne—the Salvation Army for those of you who have never stayed there. I'd managed to pick up a couple of short jobs on British-flag ships, a couple of trips down to New York and back, but after each of those trips I'd only been able to spend a week or so at a cheap hotel before having to return to the Sally Anne once again. And now that Canadian Immigration had started getting squirrely with me about shipping out of there, and now that the jobs had dried up, I really had no choice but to return to California for the rest of the winter.

At least in California I'd have plenty of places where I could stay without having to pay rent. And while there probably wasn't enough time left for me to get any work before spring, at least I'd be able to gather together whatever financial resources I still had. I'd be able to gather them up and prepare for my return to Nova Scotia when I would make my final push to finish the boat and then sail off into the sunset.

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My smile kept getting bigger and bigger as I got closer to town, because here I was at the end of my journey, walking into my old home town exactly a week after having set out from Halifax. I'd made very good time across the country thanks in part to the lack of competition for rides as I'd been just about the only hitchhiker out there in the cold and the snow. My last ride had dropped me off at about three or four in the morning at the cutoff road by the freeway, a place that was something like eight miles from town. And knowing that it was a bad time to get a ride, but also knowing that I didn't want to spend the rest of the night out there trying to sleep when I was already this close to my destination, I'd decided to just go ahead and walk it.

The sun was coming up by the time I reached the end of the cutoff and began walking along the main road into town. And as I walked along the highway, I was surprised at the number of cars that were streaming out of town, the number of commuters who were now on their way to work. I was sure that there hadn't been nearly so many of them a few years ago, back when I used to live here. But now they were everywhere, proving that there really had been a population boom in town just like my folks were always saying.

But I didn't care. It wasn't my town anymore. I was just coming here for a visit. And in fact, the more of them that I saw go by, the better I felt and the bigger my smile became. As I watched all those grim-faced people whizzing by on their way to work, as I watched all those wage-slaves go by, I felt so very free myself. I felt like I was the only one around here who was doing exactly what he wanted to do at that moment.

As I neared town, I saw some white-collar type walking along on the other side of the road. I figured that his car must have broken down or something because he didn't look like he was walking for fun. I still decided to greet him, though, and as we passed I yelled out, "Beautiful morning for a walk, isn't it?" But he didn't answer me. He didn't even look at me. He just kept walking and looking straight ahead with a stony expression on his face. But what did I care if he ignored me? That was his problem. Me, I was way too happy to let anything bother me. I felt so uplifted. I felt so absolutely free.

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Back in the fall, I'd mainly just watched Old Jim as he worked on my boat. But now in the spring and summer, I pitched in more and more until it reached the point where I was doing most of the work myself. And it wasn't easy work, either. It was all hand carpentry, all hand sawing and hand-planing on big, heavy pieces of wood. Old Jim had taught me how to do it, though, and now I was getting pretty good at it. And it was a good thing, too, since his powers were failing him fast.

He was moving slower and slower all the time. "Creepin' Moses gettin' around here." And not only was he very old, but also his eyesight and hearing were failing him thanks to his diabetes, the same diabetes that had pushed him into boat-building in the first place as it had forced him to give up fishing. But fishing was his true love, dory fishing off the old schooners on the Grand Banks. "I was on the same wessel nine year." And he loved to tell me stories from his fishing days while we worked.

But the problem was that he would keep telling the same stories over and over again since his memory was getting to be just as bad as his vision. He would tell me the same story or the same joke four times within half an hour. “He’d be a good feller to send for de doctor if de debil was dyin’.” And each time, I would respond to them just like I’d never heard them before, because he was a good man, maybe even a great man in his own way, and he deserved that consideration from me. He was a man who had worked hard all his life and was still working hard even though he accomplished less and less each day. “If de debil ain’t in dat gaw damn ripsaw den dere ain’t any such fella.” He never cheated anybody and never over-charged them, and he never built a bad boat, one that he wouldn’t go to sea in himself. And though he was far from being a strict Christian, he may have been very close to being a true Christian.

So for a man like that, what sacrifice was it on my part to listen to the same old stories over and over again and to laugh at the same old jokes? Old Jim deserved that. He deserved more than that.

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I’d never had such a hard time getting a ride between Lunenberg and Old Jim’s place, but today there was just nobody who would stop for me. And it had to be today of all days, today when I was carrying more weight than ever, because my backpack was filled with metal: not only the big old rudder for my boat which I’d gotten the blacksmith in Lunenberg to modify but also a number of other metal fittings. So my pack was very heavy, and it was a very hot day, and at the same time no one would stop and give me a ride. I’d been walking like this for miles.

I was tired and I was suffering, and I was beginning to regret the way I was and the way I lived. I was beginning to wish that I could somehow go back, that I could become as ignorant and as conformist as most other people in our society. I was beginning to wish that I could simply turn into the type of person who did all the normal things, one who got a job and bought a car, one who would never even consider doing something like what I was doing right now. But at the same time as I wished it, I also knew that it could never be. We can never go back; we can only go ahead. And once a person steps through a certain door of self-awareness, he can never go back and become ignorant again. He can only go forward, always forward, up to and hopefully through the next door. That’s the only thing he can do.

Then as I was walking along and suffering and thinking, I suddenly stepped outside myself—not physically but emotionally and perceptually. I stepped outside myself and looked at myself, and I saw myself staggering along under the weight of my load, staggering along and sweating and watching the cars go by without stopping. And when I saw it in this way, when I saw it from this perspective, I immediately began to laugh.

It was just so funny this predicament I was in. And as soon as I saw it from the outside—from outside my own self-importance—it suddenly became hilarious. So hilarious that I almost started to laugh out loud as I staggered along. I laughed at myself, and as I did so my suffering diminished, it grew smaller and smaller, and it nearly disappeared.

I could see that the real source of my suffering hadn’t been the weight or the heat or the distance I’d walked. Not at all. The real source of my suffering had been my own self-

importance, because it had been my self-importance that had made me obsess over and amplify all those little inconveniences until I'd turned them into a great affliction—until I'd turned them into suffering. And though this idea wasn't new to me at the time, though I'd read about things like this before, still it wasn't until this very moment when I experienced it firsthand that I ever came to truly understand it. It was only now that I ever came to live it.

This was a moment of clear understanding for me. It was like a small awakening. In fact, it was one of a whole series of small awakenings—one of a series of rebirths—that I'd gone through over the years. And the same as with those other awakenings, I now felt like I was seeing the world through new and fresh eyes. I felt like I was seeing things and understanding them for the very first time.

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We stopped somewhere around the continental divide in Wyoming and the driver said we should have something to eat. And then while we were at it, maybe we could celebrate my birthday. Because here I was: twenty-six years old today, flat broke and on my way to California with my tail between my legs. The boat was gone. I'd given it away—sold it for a dollar—after I'd run out of money, and also after I'd finally become aware of the fact that it had been the wrong boat for me all along, that it had never really been adequate for what I'd wanted to use it for. It had been too small and probably too unseaworthy for the types of voyages I'd dreamed of making in it. So rather than losing any more time on it by sticking around in Nova Scotia and trying to sell it, I'd decided to just end the whole thing as quickly as possible by dumping it, by giving it away. And now I found myself out on the road once again, a free man with no more impediments—with no impediments and no possessions and also unfortunately with no money.

But every ending is also a new beginning, right? And I'd soon bounce back from this one. I'd go get a job and put together another grubstake, and then I'd go live out some other dream. That's what I'd do, or at least that's what I told myself I'd do.

The driver pulled out a cupcake and wished me a happy birthday, and I thanked him for it. And in this way the two of us marked the fact that I was now another year older, that another year of my life was now gone. And not only was the year gone, but also my dream was gone.

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I got into the car and the driver started driving out into the desert without ever saying a thing. He just drove and listened to the classical music that was playing on his tape player. And me, I didn't say a thing either, because I didn't care whether he talked or not as long as he was driving me in the right direction.

He was a big guy with a marked-up face, either pock marks or scars, and he was driving a bright red muscle car. He drove along in silence and then, as he drove, he glanced down at my crotch and seemed to notice the big rip in my pants. They'd ripped out a few states back, but since they were the only pair of pants I had, all I'd been able to do about it had been to keep my legs together as much as possible. Just keep them together and try to keep my balls from flopping out all the time.

The driver glanced over at my crotch and saw the rip, and then he reached over and turned up the volume on his music. And after driving on for awhile longer, he did the same thing once again. He looked at my crotch, and he turned up the volume on his music. We drove along without saying a word, and he kept doing it over and over again, looking over and then turning up the music, until the classical music was booming out of the speakers at full volume.

What's this guy working himself up to? I asked myself. And what is he, some type of psycho? Some guy out looking for hitchhikers to murder or something like that? Some guy who figures that I'll be his next victim? Is that what's going on here? Well, I've spent way too much time out on the road by now to fall victim to some second-rate psycho like him. So if he thinks he's gonna kill me or something like that, he's sadly mistaken, because I'm just not the victim type.

Knowing that remaining calm is the most important thing in a situation like this, and also figuring that the second most important thing would be to show my potential attacker just how calm I was, I decided to break the ice and talk to the guy. And I spoke to him without the least trace of fear in my voice. I spoke to him calmly and casually as though I hadn't noticed a thing about the way he'd been behaving, "So tell me, where abouts are you going?"

He glanced at me a few more times, not only at my crotch but also at my face, and I'm sure that when he did so, he could see the resolve and the icy calm I felt at that moment. After a bit of hesitation, he said, "Right here," and then he pulled over onto the shoulder of the freeway and let me out. And as I stood there on the shoulder, I watched him cut across the median and pull back out onto the freeway going in the other direction, going back toward town.

MY BAD YEAR

So I found myself back in California with no money and no dream. And of those two problems, it was the second that was by far the worse, because sooner or later I was bound to get a ship and make some money. But where would I ever be able to find another dream now that the old one was dead? Now that I knew I wouldn't be sailing off into the sunset after all.

And not only was I without a dream, but on top of that I was almost without a place to stay. Over the last few years, I'd lost contact with a number of friends while others had simply given up the fight. And some of them had even become boring. I spent a little time with Eric, but he'd settled down with a woman and was fast on his way to becoming housebroken. All he did was work and spend time with her, and he just wasn't the same old guy to hang around with. And as far as my little brother was concerned, he'd graduated from college and gotten a job in Silicone Valley, a place where I had absolutely no desire to spend my time.

But luckily there was still Chico where Jake and his buddy Doug from the academy had gotten together with Fred and Curt, a couple of woodworker friends of Jake's, to form a sort of post-hippie-artisan woodworkers' collective. And so just like I'd spent most of my time in Chico when I'd taken my winter break from Nova Scotia, I once again made it my main place of residence in California.

When I was with them, it sometimes felt like the old spirit of the counter-culture was still alive. It felt like there was at least one small island where it was still possible to hold out some hope. Like there was at least one place where the Me Generation still hadn't slithered in and taken over yet. And if this last remnant of the counter-culture chose to devote its energies to woodworking rather than revolution, well that was just a recognition of the current realities in American society.

The group called themselves Peace and Lumber, and they spent their time making items to sell at craft fairs, while at the same time they were always on the lookout for orders to make larger items of custom-made furniture. And in those early days of the group, the whole bunch of them lived and worked around Doug's house. His garage served as their first workshop while his basement became Fred's home. And at the same time Curt, the gentle giant, had pitched a big teepee in the backyard where he lived along with any visitors who might be in town. Visitors like me or like Jake who stayed there when he wasn't staying at his girlfriend's house, or like our old friend Tom who was a frequent guest.

Tom was still a wanderer just like me. He still hadn't found his dream. He hadn't found the perfect wave or whatever it was that he was after. So also like me, he spent a lot of time at Peace and Lumber, hanging out and helping them with their work and getting high a lot, and maybe even learning a little something about woodworking.

Tom and I were both staying in the teepee that fall, but I couldn't spend all my time just hanging out. I had to get a ship and get some money together, enough money to pay for Patty to come over and live with me. Patty the beautiful English girl I'd met in Nova Scotia and who'd moved in with me for several weeks out there on the coast. She'd written to me since I'd returned to California to tell me that she wanted to come over and be with me as soon as I could get some money together—some money and a place to live. And with that inducement, I was eager to get a ship as soon as possible.

But I didn't want it to be just any ship or any job on board, because at least partially for Patty's sake, I felt that if I was going to restart my seagoing career now, I should do so on a higher level than before. I should go sit for my Third Mate's license for which I now had enough sea-time to qualify, and then I should ship out as an officer. And since Jake and Doug told me that things were finally opening up down at the officers' union, that the post-Vietnam slowdown had finally ended and that enough of the old-timers had retired to make it possible for a young guy to actually get work there for the first time in years, I was determined to go get a license. So I crammed for a few weeks and went down to the Coast Guard, and I somehow managed to pass the test on the first try. And then with my fresh new license in hand, I went down to the union to get a ship as mate. To get a ship and make some money and get back together with beautiful, sexy Patty.

And that's exactly what I did, all of it except for the last part that is, because I got a ship and I made money, but then instead of Patty in person all I got from her was a letter telling me that she wouldn't be coming to live with me after all. She said that while she'd been waiting for me to get my financial act together, her old boyfriend—the guy she'd dumped after meeting me—had come back and proposed to her. And since he was offering her marriage while all I wanted to do was to shack up with her, she'd accepted his proposal. And when I read that letter,

my whole world came crashing down around me once again as I saw the very last bit of my dream fall away. As I saw the very last hope I'd still managed to salvage from my debacle in Nova Scotia dry up and disappear. As I saw that I was now truly without a dream of any sort.

Everything was gone. My old thirst for Experience! had long since faded out, and any hopes for the Revolution! were completely dead. And even my plan to sail off into the sunset was gone, so far gone that I couldn't even consider reviving it now that I finally had a little money in my pocket once again. Because the dream just didn't seem real to me anymore. It didn't seem like my dream. It seemed like some sort of ancient memory.

I was depressed, and to make my depression even worse, it was now becoming painfully clear to me that I'd really made very little "spiritual" progress over the last few years. That most of my approach to so-called enlightenment had been more of an illusion than a reality. Not all of it, of course, because I'd made a number of advances in that direction, but I could now see that my advances hadn't been nearly as dramatic as I'd previously thought. And my present condition of aimlessness and hopelessness only served to highlight that fact.

And not only was my own personal condition depressing, but it was even worse when I looked around me at what was happening to the country as a whole. To the country and to youth culture where the squares had now come completely out of the closet. Where the Me Generation was now firmly in control. Where the counter-culture wasn't just on the run, but where it seemed to have disappeared without a trace, leaving behind no legacy whatsoever beyond a few residual clothing and hair styles. Nothing else. And even those few poor reminders of the movement were fast disappearing as disco was ever more rapidly taking over the clubs. As youth culture was ever more rapidly discoing its way into a totally mindless, self-absorbed, self-obsessed oblivion.

I had to get out. I had to find a dream, an alternative, though I had no idea what that alternative might be. But I had to find something. I couldn't just sit back and be a part of this decay.

Not knowing what to do, though, I still spent most of my time hanging out in Chico, hanging out at Peace and Lumber where as winter, spring and summer wore on, change was also starting to creep in. The group of them moved their operations out of Doug's garage. They moved into a real shop where they had room to do real work. And I spent many long, pleasant days hanging out with them at their new shop, smoking a little dope whenever any was available and talking to them and helping them with the projects they were working on, and sometimes even making little carvings myself out of scraps of wood. But as time went by, the life and the atmosphere around the shop were slowly changing and some of the frictions and personality conflicts that would eventually tear the collective apart were just beginning to show their faces. The biggest conflict of all had to do with the guys' conflicting visions of what exactly Peace and Lumber was all about: whether it was principally an alternative lifestyle or whether it was a business. And because of this conflicting vision, there was a very slow and gradual falling out taking place there, one taking place through a series of steps so small as to be nearly invisible to the casual observer.

But it wasn't so much the slow social evolution at Peace and Lumber that bothered me about continuing to hang out in Chico indefinitely. No, what really bothered me was the fact that

the dream behind the place, the dream upon which it had been built, wasn't my dream and never had been. It was their dream, their project, and though I'd shared a lot of time with the guys there, I'd never really been a part of the dream. I'd never shared the dream with them, and I never would.

So now with everyone else gone, with Eric and my brother and all the rest of them having tied themselves down, there was no one left for me to turn to for guidance or companionship but Tom. Even he was to disappear from the scene, though, as he finally settled down to a dream of his own, the dream of moving to Australia where the surf was good, and what was even better, where it wasn't a part of the United States, or at least where it wasn't officially a part. And it wasn't long before he set out to turn that dream into a reality, before he moved to Australia and left Peace and Lumber—and me—behind.

And with Tom gone, I was completely alone. Alone and without direction, hanging out and wandering around and wishing my life weren't so damned pointless. Then finally after a long time and many tries, I got lucky down at the union hall and got a job, a good long job on a shuttle ship that ran around the South China Sea—Hong Kong, Manila, Singapore, Bangkok—and never returned to the United States. I got a job that would last for six months, a job that would take me away from everything back home for the next half a year. Or maybe even longer if I decided that I just didn't feel like coming back once my time was up.

(Fragments)

As I woke from a drunken stupor in my room at the Hong Kong seamen's club, I tried to assess my situation. I was lying on top of the covers, fully dressed. And as my mind began to function more clearly, I was suddenly startled by the realization that all my money was gone. That the huge wad of hundred-dollar bills I'd had in my pocket the night before—my payoff for six months of work on the ship—just wasn't there anymore.

I tried to remember the night before. I tried to think what I might have done with it, but I was drawing a complete blank. All I could remember was drinking with the other guys at the seamen's club out at Kwai Chung, drinking and waiting for the bus that would bring us downtown. And I remembered that one oiler offering me some Valium and me saying yes and taking them—for the first and only time in my life—taking way too many of them considering how much I was drinking. Then after that, I remembered checking into this downtown seamen's club, and that was it. I couldn't remember anything else after that.

I went out into the hallway where I ran into Rick and Hussein, the two guys who were planning on going to Thailand with me in the next few days, the two I'd probably been hanging out with the night before. I asked them if they'd seen my money and they said no. They said I'd been in very bad shape the night before, even worse than my usual condition over the last six months. And then Rick asked me if I'd looked for the money in my sextant case. My sextant case, the most logical place for a mate to stash something of value. Now why didn't I think of that? So I went back into my room and, sure enough, there it was. All of it. I guess the wad had been so big that it had bothered me when I was trying to go to sleep and so I'd gotten up and put it in the case.

So now my payoff was safe, my payoff for six months of work. Six months of partying, six months of drinking and whoring and smoking Thai stick and occasionally dabbling in Heroin. Now my payoff was back in my pocket, and I had enough money to party for another six months or a year or even more.

* * * * *

I was sitting there in the bare little room where I was staying in Penang. I'd just been chasing the dragon, smoking heroin the way they do it around here, the way Kemal had taught me to do it, when I decided to top it off by smoking some weed. Now, I hadn't been a junkie long enough to know that the two drugs really aren't very compatible and that true junkies almost never smoke weed. But since I didn't know any better, I smoked away.

Soon I felt the weed rushing through me stronger than it ever had before, rushing through me almost like I'd just dropped acid. And as it came on stronger and stronger, as I drew ever nearer to the brink of hallucination, I heard a voice somewhere off in the distance—somewhere deep inside my head—repeating the same line over and over again. I listened and tried to hear what it was saying, and all the while the voice kept getting louder and louder. Then finally I could hear it. Finally I could make out what it was saying. "Something bad is gonna happen!" That was it. The same thing over and over again, louder each time it was repeated. It was exactly like in that bad acid trip I had so many years ago. It was like the whole thing was coming back to me now. And as I heard that frightening voice once again, the old panic started to come back to me as well. "Something bad is gonna happen! Something bad is gonna happen!"

I tried to relax, I tried to ignore it, but it was coming on way too strong. And as I looked around me for help, I began to notice many things as though for the first time: the cheap little room and the jar of heroin on the table and all the other signs of my current condition. And when I looked at those things, the realization suddenly hit me, the realization that something bad had already happened. Because here I was, a junkie living in a dump of a room. And no sooner had I come to that realization than I began to laugh out loud. I laughed because I could finally see the truth of my panic. I could see that all the something-bad-is-gonna-happen nonsense I'd feared for so long had now changed. It had turned into "something bad has already happened." The evil was already here. I'd already gotten myself hooked on junk, so what else was there left to fear?

And all at once, that fear of something bad in the future disappeared completely. It became a simple case of something bad that's already here. And present or past evil is so much easier to accept and to deal with than is future evil. So I could finally see the way to deal with that old fear of mine. I could see how to deal with it through faith, through a type of faith in which I accept whatever happens. A type of faith in which I accept the fact that anything can be dealt with and that any frightening future will eventually become an acceptable present. A type of faith in which the bad is every bit as acceptable to me as is the good.

* * * * *

The train pulled into the station and immediately it was engulfed in a human avalanche. People were rushing up the platforms in thick waves and others were trying to climb in the windows. They were all in a mad scramble to get aboard and get one of the available seats. But I

refused to play that game. I refused to stoop to the level of these people. I was a civilized man. I was an American. And I refused to act like an Indian.

I'd only been in India for a couple of weeks, but already I'd had enough of the place. Already I was fed up with it. And this present wild, animal-like scramble for the train only reinforced my disgust with the people and the country. So it was a good thing that I wouldn't be here much longer, that I'd only be here as long as it took me to reach Nepal. But of course the problem was that in order to reach Nepal, I'd have to ride on one of these trains. It wouldn't be this train I'd ride on, though. That much I swore to myself. And though it meant that I'd have to wait another six hours for the next one, that was just the way it would have to be. Because there was no way I was going to go Indian. I was going to maintain my self-respect and my human dignity.

As I stood in the station watching the sorry spectacle, I was approached by an old beggar who mumbled something as he stood in front of me with his hand held out. He was ragged and dirty, but his misery elicited no sympathy from me whatsoever as all I saw at that moment was one more of them, one more beggar in the seemingly endless stream that had been accosting me ever since I'd first arrived in the country. And in fact rather than sympathy, his appearance brought out the anger in me, the anger that had been steadily building up inside me at all the overcrowding and the miserable conditions I'd had to endure ever since I'd arrived. And for that reason, I now let the old guy have it. I looked him straight in the eye and said, "Piss off!"

I felt good as soon as I said it, like I'd just released something that needed to be released, but then that feeling was quickly followed by a feeling of guilt. By the guilt of knowing that I'd just yelled at some poor, helpless old man who probably really needed my help. And now as I looked him in the eye once again, I no longer saw him as a nuisance. I no longer saw him as a pathetic old man pestering me for money. Instead I saw him as a human being standing there looking back at me. A human being just like me and just like all the rest of the people in India. So I reached into my pocket and gave him some coins.

After that, I began silently apologizing to India for all the bad thoughts I'd been thinking about it. I apologized to it, and I finally began to accept it because this was just the way that India was. It was a hugely crowded place where large numbers of its people lived such a life of desperation that there was no time for a lot of social niceties. And when I looked at it now from this new perspective, I could see that while it was still a land of poverty and misery and overpopulation, at the same time it was also a land that had some sort of special beauty all its own. A beauty of which I'd been unaware up until that very moment because of my deep disgust with the bad parts of life here. Because of my disgust and also because of my American sense of superiority and self-importance.

But now I could finally see the beauty of India, and I could also forgive its ugliness. And in that spirit of forgiveness, I decided that maybe I should go ahead and get on this train after all. So I walked up to the train and squeezed inside one of the doors, and then I stood there just inside. I stood there with the lowest of the low, with those who had been too slow or too weak to get a better place during the scramble to board the train. I stood there, and I accepted my place just like an Indian.

* * * * *

There was a holiday of some sort on the day I caught the plane out of Delhi, and the entire city was alive with fireworks. There were fireworks going off everywhere I looked, on every rooftop and in every street. But what exactly the holiday was I didn't know. And at this point neither did I care, because by now I'd been here long enough and it was time for me to go back—back to the United States.

My time for escape and for partying had finally come to an end. And in fact, it had already been fading out for some time as not only had I given up smoking heroin shortly after my bad experience in Penang, but I'd also cut out the drinking and the whoring before I'd come to India. And if only it hadn't been for hashish, I wouldn't have had a single vice left by now. The hash was certainly a vice with me, though, what with the way I chain-smoked it whenever it was available, with the way I sometimes went through a whole tola in a single day.

But maybe even that was coming to an end now, too. I really couldn't be sure. The only thing I knew for sure was that it was time for me to go back. I'd been out of the country for a year now—six months on the ship and another six months of wandering around Asia—and now my trip was finally over.

It was time to stop running away, time to go back to my destiny whatever that destiny might be. It was time for me to go back and confront myself and my culture and my country. And while I knew that there was nothing I could do about the country and about what it was so inexorably devolving into, maybe there was still something I could do about myself. Maybe I could finally face myself, face what I'd made of myself, face what I'd become. And maybe I could even face what exactly it was that I was capable of becoming in the future.

PART IV: THE LAKE

The next morning I ate my breakfast of oatmeal, and though I had nothing left with which to sweeten it, still it was a great change of pace after all those days of beans and rice. It tasted so good, and it sat so well on my stomach, that I soon lost all desire to get up from where I sat and get moving. Instead I preferred to sit and stoke the fire for awhile and to talk. I'd collected way more branches than I needed for a little breakfast fire, and now as I fed them into my friend, it swelled up into full, blazing life.

You know old friend, this is my last day out here in the wilderness, and this spot is my last campsite. So it's kind of like I'm saying goodbye right now. It's like I'm leaving forever, like I'll never be back. And do you know what's even worse? It's that once I leave, I'll never be this high again. Never. I'll never be able to achieve this same mental state ever again. It's like I know that all the rest of my life is going to be downhill from here. It's like I know that this is the peak of my life, right here and right now. And do you know what? I really don't want to go. I don't want it all to end.

I mean, when will I ever be able to experience this again? It'll never happen. And even if I were to return to the wilderness someday, it just wouldn't be the same because it wouldn't be the first time. And the first time is always the best with things like this. It's always the purest and the most real. But the problem is that it can never be repeated. The problem is that you can only do things for the first time once.

But sure, if I were to come out here and spend another month alone in the wilderness like I've just done, I'd go through a lot of the same stuff I've been through this time. I'd regain some of my current mental capacities, though I just know that I'd never regain all of them, not by a long shot. And the ones I'd regain probably wouldn't be the most important ones, either. I'm almost sure of that. Like I could probably regain the capacity to visualize that I have right now, this ability to call up my mental images so clearly and so vividly that I can virtually see the people and places I'm thinking about. And my ability to dream would probably return, too, with my dreams once again becoming as intense and real as they are now, with them becoming just as much a part of my waking state as they are right now. But those things are trivial when you get right down to it. They're nothing but window-dressing. They're just a small and insignificant part of my current mental state. And once I leave this wilderness, that state will be lost to me. It'll be lost forever. So you see why I don't want to go, don't you? You see why I want to stay out here for a little while longer. Why I want to stay out here forever.

The fire didn't answer and it didn't encourage me to stay. But at the same time it didn't say anything to discourage me, either. In fact, it didn't say anything at all. It merely listened to what I had to say.

I felt like I needed more advice, like I needed someone else's opinion, and I soon thought about the lake. The lake with its profound tranquility, its deep, calm wisdom. Yes the lake, that was who I should ask. So after glancing down at the fire to make sure I could leave it unattended, I was up on my feet and approaching the lake.

I approached it slowly and respectfully, silently questioning it, silently asking it whether I should stay or whether I should go. And I asked for that advice in a humble, deferential way, knowing how much bigger and older the lake was than me, knowing it had no obligation to tell me anything at all as small and insignificant as I was in this giant wilderness. But still I approached it, walking slowly and repeating my question over and over again. I approached it with shuffling steps, speaking silently and listening for a reply. Listening but hearing nothing. I approached it until I found myself standing right at the edge of the lake, and there I stood looking out at the water and awaiting a response.

I stood and I waited, and I felt the urge to lose patience with the lake but fought against that urge. I knew that lakes are masters of patience and that the only way to learn anything from them is through practicing a patience of your own. So I stood and waited, and I waited some more. But the longer I stood there, the more the mosquitoes from along the shore of the lake were zeroing in on me. The longer I stood there, the more hundreds of them there were buzzing around my head and landing on my body—and the more difficult it was becoming for me to concentrate on the question I was asking the lake. They were so bad that my mind kept drifting ever more fondly back toward the fire, back toward where I knew I could escape the worst of the vampire horde. And finally there came a point when my patience with the lake gave way altogether, and without giving it so much as a thank you for its time, I turned my back and walked away. And while I wasn't angry with it and didn't feel like insulting it in any way, still I wished that it had said something—anything—before those damned mosquitoes had driven me away.

On my way back to the fire, I stopped to gather a few more dried branches from a tree I passed along the way, and I added them to my pile of firewood. A pile which was now so big that it would be able to keep my friend the fire alive for at least a couple of hours. A pile so big that no sooner had I become aware of its size than I knew right then and there that I wouldn't be going anywhere that day, but that instead I'd be spending the whole day right there in that same spot, feeding the fire and talking to it and discussing whatever it was that I wanted to discuss: my life or my thoughts or my quest or what have you.

Hey, you know what I just thought? I thought that maybe the lake gave me an answer after all, and that this is the answer, this bunch of wood I just brought back to you. Do you know what I'm talking about? I mean like the way my thoughts kept coming back to you as I stood there. Like maybe that was the lake telling me to come back and stay with you. Maybe that was the lake's way of telling me that I should stay right here with you today. Do you think that's what the lake was saying?

The fire didn't answer. The fire said nothing, and it did nothing besides flare up ever larger as I fed it more and more branches.

It's like you never really know about nature when it speaks to you. I mean, it's so hard to tell what it's saying or even to tell if it's speaking to you at all. And when you think it's not saying a thing, why that may be the very time when it's saying the most. I don't know. I'm still trying to figure it out, because even now after all this time I've been out here, I'm not the least bit sure about it. I'm not sure about anything. Like I'm not even sure if you're speaking to me right now or not. I don't know if you've been answering me all along or not.

I stopped and listened for some reply from the fire, but it said nothing to me. Or at least I think it said nothing.

Oh well, that's something I guess I'll never know. Because if I can't tell now after all these days I've spent out here with you, how am I ever going to be able to tell, huh? How will I ever know if I don't know right now?

Once again the fire remained silent.

I mean, this is my chance, my only chance, my last, best hope to ever really understand anything like that. And if I don't do it today, I just know that it'll be too late. Because once I go back to civilization and all its distractions and everything, I'll lose most of what I have right now. Once I go back, I'll never be able to really speak to a lake again, or a river, or even a fire for that matter. I'll never be able to do it no matter how hard I try. So this is it. This is the one and only day I have left.

So what do you think? How should I spend it? What should I do today? Should I tell you about my life? No, I don't think you want to hear about that. I think you've already heard as much as you'll ever want to hear about that subject—or you've probably heard way more than you want to hear, haven't you? So that's no good... Hey, I know! The book. The Perfection of Wisdom Sutras. I haven't looked at it in days now. And I mean, I brought it out here to study it and try to figure it out, you remember? So what better thing could I possibly do today, on my last day in the wilderness, than read through it one last time?

The fire didn't answer my question, and it continued to maintain its silence as I fished through my backpack and came up with the book in question.

You know, they always say that the intellect is a very poor instrument. It's a bad way to work toward enlightenment. It's slow and it's plodding, and it's so dangerous, too. The danger of insanity is so very real and so ever-present. And I know that's true, I know it for a fact because I've actually seen my insanity. I've seen it intimately and up close, and I know what it is. And as you'd expect with any good intellectual, my insanity contains a strong sexual element, an element of sexual obsession, a fixed sexual idea that...

Hey wait a minute. Did I just say that I'm an intellectual? Is that what I said? Well it's true whether I like to admit it or not, and that's just the way things are. I'm an intellectual in spite of all the efforts I've made over the years to deny that fact. I'm a person who has no way of approaching enlightenment other than through the intellect, a person whose intellect is my gift—my gift and my source of power and progress—while at the same time it's also my curse. So you see, that's why I have to fall back onto this book right now. Because without it, what else do I have? What other tools could I use to make any sort of progress at all besides books and my intellect?

No, you don't have to answer that one, old friend. It was just a rhetorical question.

As I sat by the fire, I opened the well-worn book and began to look through it, stopping to read the sections that I'd underlined or marked in other ways. I reread each of the lines and phrases and stanzas that had caught my attention upon earlier readings, and I paused from time to

time to look at the fire or to stare out at the lake and to contemplate the passages I'd just read, to mull them over and try to let their significance sink in. Then after a time, I got up and began to move around a little as I thought. I strolled down by the lake and up toward the hills, and I looked all about me at the seemingly endless wilderness in which I was immersed. I walked around for awhile, and then I returned to the fire only to get up again later to go for another walk. And I repeated this same pattern many times over the next few hours, sometimes returning to the fire with more branches to add to my ever-shrinking pile. I read the book, and I thought about it, and I discussed some of the passages with the fire.

So this is it, huh, old friend? This is the deepest and most profound book ever written? I don't know... I mean, there's so much of it that's nothing special, just easy and straight forward stuff, and then the rest of it... Well, I guess it depends on how you take it. Like some of the statements could be truly profound. They could completely upset and rearrange your view of the world and everything in it, or then again they could just roll right off you like they were nothing. They could be taken as nothing more than a bunch of word games.

Like take the last part of the Bodhisattva Vow for instance, where the book says that after leading countless beings into Nirvana, no beings have been led into Nirvana, and in fact there's not even anyone who has led them to it. Now that could be a profound statement or it could be a game... Though now that I think about it, maybe that's not such a great example after all because of the way the book comes right out in the very next sentence and explains the whole thing. The way it says that you wouldn't be a Bodhisattva if the concept "being" ever occurred to you. So maybe I should look for a different example...

But do I really need examples when it's so plain to see what the book is up to here? I mean, its true goal is obvious, isn't it? It's to teach us to think in a whole new way from ever before, to think without grasping, without getting hold of anything, without using anything as a basis for knowledge or wisdom or anything else. And that's a hard thing to do, you know that? It's a very hard thing. In fact, it's probably impossible because it goes against all normal human desires and tendencies. And it especially goes against the desire for certainty. But within the Perfection of Wisdom, nothing can ever be certain. You can never actually know anything within the common definition of that word. Why, the book even comes out at one point and says that to the extent you don't procure perfect wisdom, to that extent you procure it.

So that's what the book is all about. It's about shooting down anything and everything we might be tempted to grasp or procure or take as a basis for thought. And it spends a lot of time shooting them down. It... Do you want to hear a few examples now?

The fire didn't say that it wanted to hear examples. The fire didn't say a thing.

Okay then, I'll give you one or two... Like take Nirvana for instance. I mean, it must be real, right? It's the great eternal goal of Buddhism, so it has to be real, don't you think? No! Wrong!! The book doesn't say that at all. And in fact, at one point it actually says in so many words that it's not real. It says that Nirvana is like a magical illusion, that it's like a dream... And in another place, it shoots down both Bodhisattva and Perfect Wisdom. It says that it sees nothing that corresponds to either of those words, and then it asks you which "Bodhisattva" it should train in which "Perfect Wisdom." Now that's a good way of saying that there's no reality

behind either of them, don't you think? Including this "Perfect Wisdom" that I'm studying right now... And the book even comes out and questions enlightenment itself by saying that it's just a word, a mere word, which is why it's called "enlightenment." So even it can't be taken as anything real or solid. Even it can't be taken as a basis...

Do you see where I'm going with this?

The fire didn't say whether it saw or not.

It's like you're supposed to question everything. Like you're supposed to doubt everything—and I mean absolutely everything. And you're never allowed to pull a Descartes and latch onto some basic and fundamental "truth" and then use it to rebuild your old world view and your philosophy. You're supposed to continue to function within the world of doubt, with no basis at all for your thought, and in fact with no basis for your doubt, either. And that's a very difficult thing to do. It's an impossible thing to do...

And it only works if you take this stuff seriously, because with all the statements I've been talking about and all the statements I haven't mentioned, you could very easily laugh them off if you wanted to. You could take them as nothing but word games. You could say that they were nothing more than ancient parlor games or old mind games that the authors were playing on the monks of their day... You could laugh them off and then go right on grasping your ignorance. You could find absolutely nothing in this book but a good laugh... I guess it's like what Lao Tzu said about how the ignorant will laugh when they hear it, and therefore you know it's the Tao. It's just like that with the Perfection of Wisdom. You can laugh at it... But I never laughed, did I? Did you ever hear me laugh at it?

The fire didn't say whether it had heard me or not. The fire kept its answer to itself.

No, of course I didn't. I always took it seriously. I always tried to understand it—and I mean truly understand it, all the way to its very depths, all the way to the core. I tried to absorb it. I tried to live it, to make it a part of me... Like look at how I've worked on that part about no training. You know the part I mean. The part where the book says that your training is no training and that no one is trained in this training. Well, I've spent a lot of time trying to understand that phrase lately and also trying to practice it. Trying to figure out how exactly I can train myself in this no training. This no training where no one is trained....

But you can see how hard it is, can't you? You can see that it's impossible. So how do I go about doing it if it can't be done? How do I train myself in no training?

The fire offered me no answers. It did nothing more than lend me a sympathetic ear—that is if fires can be said to have ears. The fire gave me no support other than to listen to me for hour after hour as I contemplated the meaning of the Perfection of Wisdom, as I probed it as deeply as my little mind would take me. The fire listened to me when I talked, and it patiently awaited my return each time I went out for a walk, and it flared up gratefully each time I fed it a few more branches. It listened and listened, and the whole time it said nothing.

Then finally, with the day fading away and the time fast approaching for me to begin preparing my supper, I knew that my time was running out. I knew that I'd have to try some new

strategy if I was ever going to achieve anything before my last day in the wilderness came to an end. I knew that I'd have to try something that would get me out of my logical strait-jacket, something that would release me from the prison of my intellect. I knew that I'd have to try some form of meditation.

But the trouble was that I'd never received any formal training in meditation. I was strictly self-taught when it came to meditating, so my chances of success were probably very limited. Or were they really? Were they really all that bad? Because now that I came to think about it, maybe my chances were actually pretty good. Maybe my self-taught meditation technique might be just the thing to use on the big questions I was asking. Maybe it would work far better than any of the official types of meditation, because given the fact that each of those techniques was created to achieve a specific end, that meant that there was little you could expect to achieve with it other than that particular end. But as for me, I wasn't going after anything specific. I was after it all. I had no ends in mind, and I wanted no limits. I just wanted to achieve as much as I could achieve. I wanted to go as far as I could possibly go. I wanted to go all the way...

So I began to make preparations for what I knew could be a very long, very intense excursion into the unknown—into the unknowable. I drank some water from my canteen, and I urinated, and I applied fresh mosquito repellant to my face and hands, and I gathered more branches which I set on the fire in a way that I hoped would keep it burning for the longest time possible. And then once all that was done, I sat down in my spot beside the fire. I sat down in my power spot, and I began my quest—my final quest, my greatest quest, my quest for the absolute.

I concentrated on my breath as I relaxed and breathed slowly and calmly, and I let my mind play about in any way it saw fit. Because as far as I was concerned, all my attention was on my breathing. In and out. In and out. Ever so slowly and ever so easily.

Breathe in. Breathe out. That's all I have to do. Just that and nothing more. Breathe in. Breathe out. There's nothing else in the world. No questions to answer, no dilemmas to solve. Just breathe in. Breathe out. That's all there is to it. And if my mind happens to wander over to some idea from the Perfection of Wisdom, that's just the way it is. That has nothing to do with me. All I'm doing is breathing in. Breathing out.

I breathed slowly and my body relaxed and relaxed some more. And my mind began to leave the present behind and to wander wherever it liked.

Oh, remember Nanci that day when she was... No, that's not what I'm here to think about. I don't care about sex right now. Sex means nothing to me. Sex is small-time. I'm here to think about the Perfection of Wisdom. I'm here to... No, I'm just here to breathe, that's all. I'm here to breathe in. Breathe out. I'm not here to think about old lovers or childhood traumas or anything like that. I'm just here to breathe...

And I'm here to think about enlightenment. Enlightenment which is nothing but a word—which of course is why we call it enlightenment, right? I'm here to think about that, about the enlightenment which doesn't exist, which is nothing at all. Just a word, an empty, meaningless word. Enlightenment... nothing... emptiness... Oh, who cares if it makes any sense or not? I

don't have to figure it out. All I've gotta do is breathe, that's all. Just breathe. Breathe in. Breathe out.

I continued to breathe slowly, and my body continued to relax ever more deeply. And in time, my mind began to leave the here and now far behind and to wander ever more freely through my thoughts and my memories and my past and my ideas. And eventually it came to the Perfection of Wisdom.

My training is no training and no one is trained. And not only that, but no one does the training, either. There's no training and no trainer and no one to train. None of it exists. And in fact, there's not even anyone to think about the no training, and there's no thought. Yes, even the thought of no training doesn't exist. Even the thought is no thought, and it has no substance. So my thought is no thought. And even at this very moment, even this thought itself doesn't exist. Even this thought of no thought is itself no thought, and it has no existence. None of it has any basis or any substance. The thought doesn't exist, and the no thought doesn't exist, and even this moment doesn't exist. None of it...

Hey, what's that? It feels like a mosquito on my face, but what's it doing there? I thought I put plenty of repellant on. I thought there'd be no problem. I thought... Oh shit, now it's biting me. Now I'm sure of it. Now I've gotta... But hey, wait a minute. I can't go swatting it right now. I mean, you can't go killing mosquitoes when you're trying to become enlightened, can you? It seems like it goes against everything... No I'll just have to take it, that's what I'll have to do. I'll have to give up a little blood for the cause. Because all I really have to do right now is breathe, that's all. Just breathe. Breathe in. Breathe out. That's the only thing I have to do. Breathe in. Breathe out.

I breathed and breathed, and my body began to relax once again. And after a time, my mind took leave of the here and now—of the here and now and of the mosquito—and it once again wandered about as it pleased. It wandered through my thoughts and my cares until it left all of them behind, all my present and all my past and even my future. And then finally it came back to the Perfection of Wisdom.

No thought, that's what my thoughts are. They're no thought, and there's no thinker, either, no one to think the no thought. There's no thought and no training, and no self to think or to train. Because only no self is capable of no thought and no training. Only no self can ever attain perfect wisdom... But wait a minute, doesn't the book say that the self is the same as the perfection of wisdom, and that to cultivate the self is to cultivate the perfection of wisdom? So that must mean that the no self is the no perfection of wisdom, mustn't it? That the no self attains the no perfection of wisdom... But that doesn't make any sense. The no self has to be the perfect wisdom just as much as the self. Both of them have to be the perfect wisdom, both of them and neither since neither of them really exists. They don't exist and neither does the perfect wisdom. So does that make them the no perfect wisdom? Does that mean that while the self and the no self are the perfect wisdom, they're also the no perfect wisdom? That they're...

Is that another mosquito? Did I just feel another mosquito land on my face? I could swear I did... Or did I? I don't know if I'm just imagining it or what... Hey come on now, that's enough about mosquitoes already! I've gotta stop thinking about them and start thinking about

breathing. That's what I've gotta do. I shouldn't be thinking about mosquitoes right now. I shouldn't be thinking about anything at all, nothing but air and breathing. That's the only thing I should be thinking about, and that's the only thing I should be doing. Just breathing in. Breathing out. That's all. Breathe in. Breathe out.

I breathed and relaxed and breathed and relaxed, but my mind wanted to maintain its mosquito watch. And it wasn't until after much time and much effort that it was finally able to forget about the present and wander freely within the mental dimension. To wander until it left behind the here of space and the now of time. To wander until it approached the very limits of self and other.

The perfect wisdom is the self and it's the no self. And at the same time, it's neither the self nor the no self. Perfect wisdom is beyond all those categories. It's beyond self and it's beyond thought and it's beyond no thought. It's beyond... It's beyond the capacity of the mind to ever understand, and so is its connection to thought or to self. It's beyond all those categories of the mind. It's a question that can never be answered. It's a question that can only be asked, a question that can only be contemplated.

Self and no self and perfect wisdom, these are mere words. They're nothing but figures of speech. They're empty words that have no meaning. And the same goes for thought and no thought and all the rest. They're meaningless concepts. They're words that signify nothing. They have no substance. They correspond to no reality. They're empty words and empty concepts, completely and totally empty. Because there's no self, and there's no other, and there's no thought of self or other. There's no thought at all. There's...

Oh no, not another mosquito! Is that what I feel? Did another one just land on my face, or am I getting paranoid? Am I just making this up, or did I really feel one? Did I... Hey, come on now fella. This is no time to worry about a few goddamned mosquitoes. I mean, what does it really matter whether they land or not? What does a bite or a little blood mean when there's so much more at stake? So come on and relax. Just relax and breathe, that's all you've gotta do. Just breathe, just that and nothing more. Just breathe and relax and breathe. Breathe in. Breathe out. Breathe in. Breathe out. Breathe in...

I breathed and breathed and tried to relax, but it was even harder now after this latest interruption than it had been after the previous one. My body was tense and it refused to relax, and my mind was obsessed with the idea of mosquitoes landing on my face and sucking my blood. So it took me a long time, a very long time and a whole lot of breathing, before my mind was finally able to leave the present behind once again. Before it was able to wander about as it pleased. To wander further and ever further out within the mental dimension, all the way out past space and beyond time, all the way out toward the limits of mind. Out toward that place where self and other disappear altogether.

The self and no self, thought and no thought, these are all meaningless. They're empty. They have no substance. And in fact, they're so empty that even their emptiness is empty. But at the same time that they're totally without substance, their very emptiness is their substance. They're empty of all substance, and their substance is pure emptiness, an emptiness so pure that

it's even empty of itself. The two are the same, though of course they're completely different. Substance and emptiness, emptiness and substance. There's a oneness, and there's a separation...

Or is there? Because when you've gone beyond all thought and even beyond no thought, how can you say anything like that at all? How can you say that there's a oneness or not? How can you say that there's anything? Anything at all? I mean, how can you even use the words "there is?" What do those words mean when you've gone beyond all thought and all no thought and all possibility of thought and all impossibility? What does it mean to say "there is" or "there is not?" Can those words—or any other words for that matter—can they have any meaning whatsoever? Can they signify anything at all? "There is" or "there is not," can you even use those words or those concepts? Can you...

Hey, what was that I just felt? I'm sure it wasn't another mosquito, but what was it? Was it... Rain! That's what it was. It was a raindrop I just felt. A raindrop and now another and another. Now I'm starting to feel a whole lot more of them.

So the rain is back, huh? The rain is pursuing me again just like it did during that first week or so I was out here in the bush. Back when it rained on me every single time I tried to work on my raft or even to read the Perfection of Wisdom. Back when it rained so hard and so often that it almost seemed like the rain was after me, like it was trying to stop me and make me turn back. And the funny thing about it was that it only rained when I was actually trying to make progress on my expedition by building the raft or studying the book. Never when I was just wandering around or hanging out. It was all so strange, like I was causing the rain with my activity or something like that.

And was I? Was I stirring up some force that was using the rain to try to stop me or what? Was something trying to speak to me through the rain and tell me to go back?... Or was it really me all along? Was the rain my way of holding myself back? My way of stopping myself from achieving enlightenment? Is that what it was all along? And is that what's happening right now? Am I trying to stop myself by bringing on this hard, soaking rain?

I don't know... But whether it's me or whether it's some outside force trying to hold me back, isn't it just like the way that Mara tried to hold Buddha back? And remember how Buddha overcame Mara? Remember that he did it by touching the earth and calling on it as a witness? Yes, that's how he did it. That's how he overcame Mara. And that's how I can overcome this rain, too. I can do it by calling on the earth. I can do it by touching the earth...

Unfortunately though, that strategy didn't work for me. Not like it did for Buddha back in the day. Because even after I'd called on the earth as a witness, it continued to pour down rain. It rained and it poured, and the drops came down so big and so hard that they would have soaked me right to the skin in no time if I hadn't given up on my meditation session long enough to pull my poncho out of the backpack and put it on. And then after I'd done that, I sat back and waited for the rain to stop. When it finally did, though, I knew that it was way too late for me to resume my session. I knew that I'd wasted too much time and that I'd lost the thread of the Perfect Wisdom all too completely to be able to get it back in any reasonable length of time. No, there was no time for anything after the rain except to prepare my evening meal and to discuss the day's events with my old friend the fire.

And discuss them I did. I talked and talked about what I thought at the time had been a near brush with enlightenment, a moment when I'd stood at its very edge and stared it right in the face. And though I thought and talked about it in exactly that way during my evening session with the fire, I can see now from a calmer and more distant perspective that that simply wasn't the case. I can see that I'd never been anywhere in the general vicinity of enlightenment, not even close enough to have seen it somewhere off in the distance. And my belief that I'd come so close was really just another of those many illusions of which my life has been so full. Another of those illusions in which I'd imagined myself at the time to be far more mentally and spiritually developed than I'd ever been in reality. And while I'd gained something of great value from my expedition into the wilderness and my study of the Perfection of Wisdom, I'd come nowhere near to achieving the ultimate.

But when I spoke with the fire that night, I was still under the full rapture of my illusions. I thought I'd almost been there. I thought I'd come so close, so very close. I thought that enlightenment had been right within my grasp, and that if only it hadn't been for that damned rain—that rain and those mosquitoes—why then...

The next morning I hiked the rest of the way to the road, that slash of manmade order cutting through the haphazard non-order of the wilderness. I reached the road and hiked along it in the direction of civilization, and then after two days of hiking, a car came by and I got a ride the rest of the way to town. I got a ride back to the "real" world, back to the world of people. Back to the world where my life awaited me, my life with all its distractions and its temptations and its inanities and its mediocrity. Back to the world of my ignorance.

And while I knew that I'd never again be quite as ignorant as I'd been back before I came out into the wilderness, even then I was under no great illusion about the permanence of the high that I'd experienced during my month in the bush. Even then at the time of my greatest self-delusion, it was clear to me that I wasn't Buddha and I wasn't a Bodhisattva. Why, I wasn't even Jesus Christ returning from his forty days in the desert.

No, I was just a guy and nothing more. But a guy who had done something big. A guy who had tested himself and had achieved some sense of who he was and what his capabilities might be. A guy who had achieved a certain knowledge of himself, a knowledge that he knew would never be lost altogether.